MAGIC ISLAND

Zai Whitaker

Illustrations
Amitava Sengupta

Nehru Bal Pustakalaya

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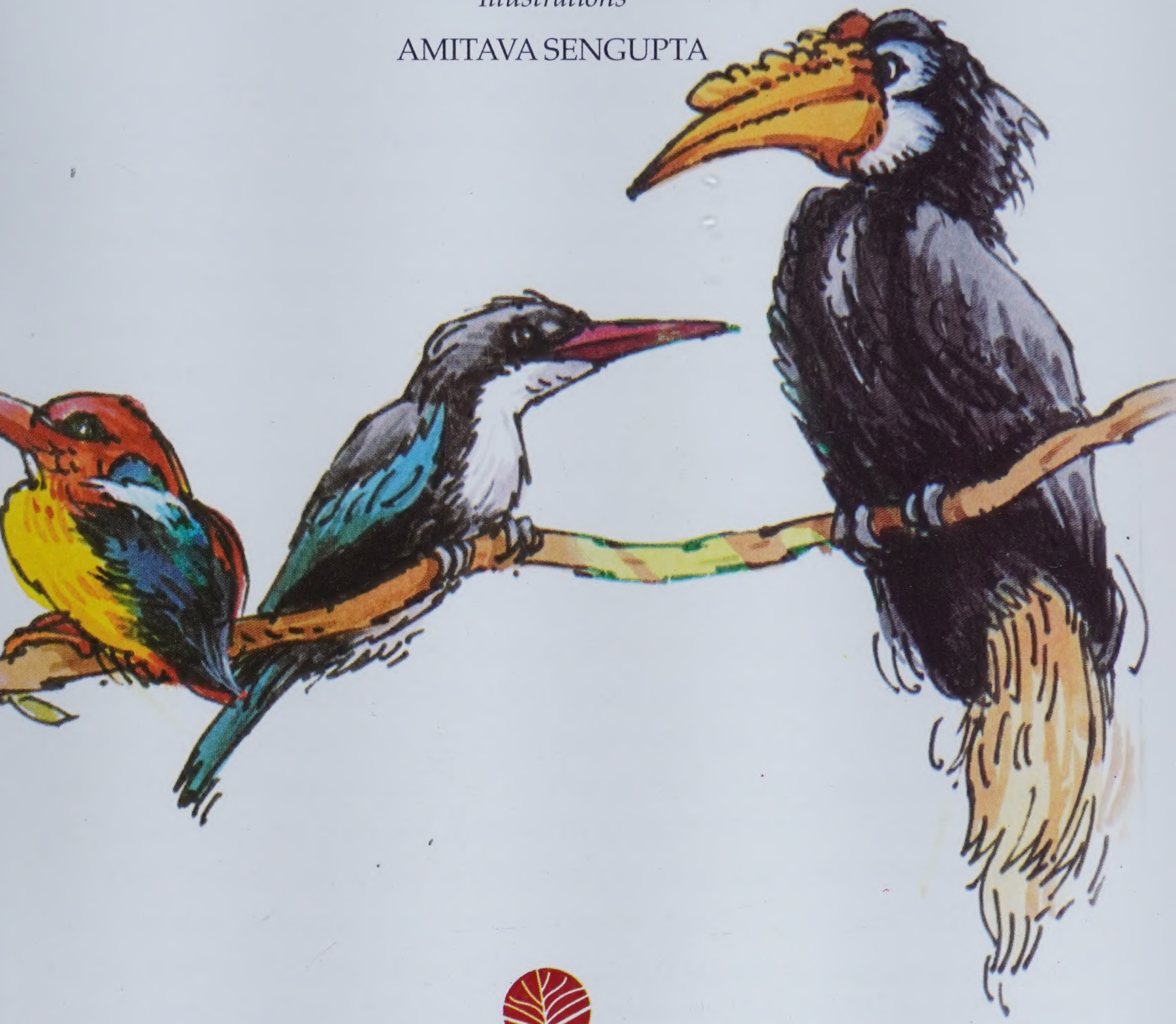

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HELLO, READER!

There are many of us 'mainlanders' who are fascinated by the Andaman and Nicobar islands. We have seen and enjoyed their beauty over many years. At the same time, we have been disturbed by some of the changes happening there. We try to get the latest news about the Jarawa, the Sentinelese, the new airport, the shark fin industry. For the islanders, these are all day-to-day, ordinary things. But for people like me, they are exciting and of deep interest.

My relationship with the islands started almost thirty years ago, when I stood on the deck of the rusty old ship *State of Haryana*, feeling so sea-sick that my head felt like one of those colourful wooden tops, and my legs like a badly-made custard pudding. With me was Annamalai, a snake hunter from the Irula tribe of Tamil Nadu. We worked together at the Madras Snake Park; he as the animal supplier and I as the much less adventurous paper-pusher in the office. But remember, a piece of paper can be just as dangerous as a snake!

The Irulas are very snake-smart and can track a snake the way some people can track tigers and panthers. But while large animals like tigers leave clear tracks that are easy to 'read' and follow, snakes leave only a faint, almost invisible mark. Annamalai could look at a snake track and tell the

species, size, and the approximate time when it had passed that way.

That's why he was with me; and we were excited. This was going to be the first of a series of research and collection trips to the Andamans, and over the years the Snake Park found many reptile species that were either new to science or to this part of the world.

But this was not a surprise; we expected to find 'new' and

un-named animals because so little study had been done in this archipelago. What really did surprise me was the way the Andaman settlers talked about the indigenous people. Indigenous people are those people who belong to, and own a particular place. The indigenous tribes of the Andamans and Nicobars are the Jarawa, Onge, Sentinelese, Andamanese, Shompen and Nicobarese. They are also

called tribals, natives, and adivasis. Adivasi is used more often now, since the other words are thought to be condescending. But in the Andamans, I heard a term that really shocked me: 'junglees'. This is the most insulting label of all. It is also very misleading, because we call people junglees when they are being rude and behave in an uncivilised manner. In fact, indigenous people are much more polite and considerate than we, the civilised lot.

On that journey by ship, I met someone who spoke about the 'junglees'. I asked how he could call them such a dreadful name, and he coolly replied, "They are stupid fellows. They don't wear clothes, they eat wild animals … they haven't even tasted rice, some of them! Totally uncivilised, they are."

The word 'uncivilised' rang in my ears throughout my time in the islands. The more I heard and read about the wonderful culture and lifestyle of the 'junglees', the more ridiculous it sounded.

I thought a lot about how quickly and thoughtlessly we use this word. It is a general feeling in India, that forest dwellers are not civilised because they don't live as we do. They don't live in cities, and they don't go to school and college. They don't love making money, they don't eat junk food, and they don't watch television. They are different, and we feel that anyone who is different from us is, somehow, not okay. Is this fair?

Let us look at the word 'uncivilised' again. It means the opposite of the word civilised. In my mind, a civilised person is one who treats other people and his surroundings with respect and understanding. Indigenous people certainly do this. They look after one another's children like their own,

share whatever food they gather or hunt, and have no personal property. Everything belongs to the tribe or group. There is no 'mine' and 'yours', and therefore, no fights about silly little things. This is something we 'civilised' people often do. When was the last time you had a fight over your computer or cricket bat or some other favourite possession?

The other symptom of being civilised is a good relationship with one's environment. Indigenous people are known to be gentle, caring and wise about using their natural resources. They only take as much as they need, while we plunder whatever happens to be around. As we shall see later in this book, the indigenous people of the Andamans and Nicobars have a deep and intimate knowledge of, and respect for, their environment. How wonderful it would be if we non-adivasis were as smart as they are! But we cut down life-giving forests, kill beautiful and rare animals, dump toxins (poisons) into our water-table, and even make huge cities in areas where there is not a single drop of water! The Jarawas and Shompens could certainly teach us how to manage our lives and resources better. But they would also scratch their heads in wonder at the mess that we've made of the world.

So don't use the word 'junglee' ... unless you want to use it on yourself!

There was another shock awaiting us. How little the island people knew about the history of their home! It was the middle of the nesting season of the saltwater crocodile, and we wanted to collect a nest of eggs and take it back to hatch at the Snake Park. The government official, who had to issue the permit, insisted that crocodiles lay one egg every year, and thus gave us permission to collect one nest, of one egg! We gave up

trying to convince him and everyone else in his office, that saltwater crocodiles lay 30-60 eggs.

At that time there were few very books about the Andamans and Nicobars except the old reports written by British officers before India became independent. These are rather depressing, all about the 'naked savages' in the jungles, and the care (and punishment) of thousands of prisoners. I found little about the unique cultures and ecosystems, and absolutely nothing for children.

Nothing for the children of the Andamans and Nicobars! Inheritors and guardians of this treasure trove! It did not seem right at all, because children are so much more interested in, and caring about the environment than most of us greedy adults. And at least ten times as sensible.

I am writing this book with the hope that it will make all you Andaman and Nicobar children proud of the very special place in which you live. Many of the facts will be known to you already. In fact I'm sure that you know much, much more than I do. But together, we can get excited about the fascinating history of these islands. We will also talk about the treasures of the islands' reefs and forests, and the amazing cultures of isolated tribes who have never communicated with outsiders except from a distance, and usually through gifts, gestures and arrows. This book is also meant for young people in other parts of India, who will, I hope, become interested in these magic islands and perhaps even visit them one day.

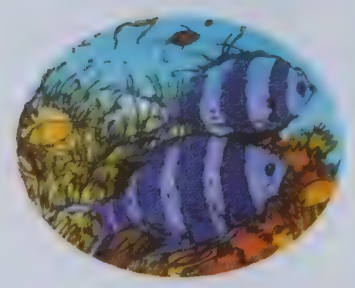
If you like fiction, then you will like the history of the Andamans and Nicobars because it has all the elements of a good story. There are pirates and shipwrecks, storms and earthquakes, adventures in dense tropical jungles, murders,

heroes, villains … you name it. But the story of the colonisation of the archipelago is also a lesson in itself. It is full of useful morals and warnings. You have to draw your own conclusions, though; I'm not going to do it for you. History tells us a lot about ourselves, helps us get to know who we are. For example, the experiences of the tribes make us examine our own attitude towards indigenous people … or anyone who happens to be different from us.

I am a teacher, and I enjoy being with children. Come with me on a journey to explore some interesting facts and ideas about this fantastic archipelago. Perhaps this small book will 'hook' you to the Andamans and Nicobars and make you aware of the challenges and changes that face them. If this happens to the children who inhabit the islands, there is a chance that this unique environment and its tribes, can survive. You children are a new and smart generation, and can undo at least some of the mistakes of the past. But first, you must understand the history of the people as well as the land; and what needs to be done in the future. This is what 'Magic Islands' is all about.

Annamalai has passed away but I would like to dedicate this book to him because he was the person who introduced me to the animals found there. I also thank Harry Andrews and Rom Whitaker of the Madras Crocodile Bank for their help with the resources and information.

The names of ships are italicised, and the old names of countries and cities are used because that's what they were called then. For example, I've used Burma, not Myanmar, and Madras instead of Chennai. Where I feel you may not know the old name, I've given the new one as well.



YOU'RE A MILLIONAIRE!

An American car mechanic won a lottery and suddenly, out of the blue, he had a million dollars to spend! He was interviewed on television, and I was expecting to see a very jolly man smiling broadly and laughing loudly. But instead, this lucky lottery winner looked truly miserable, as if he was off to a funeral. When asked whether he was delighted and feeling on top of the world, he shook his head in quick disagreement. He listed his worries and problems: his friends and relatives were jealous, the whole world was giving him advice on how to invest and spend his money, his sons wanted to give up their jobs and enjoy life, his wife wanted to move to a more fashionable city, and reporters and television people (glaring at the interviewer) were bothering him all the time.

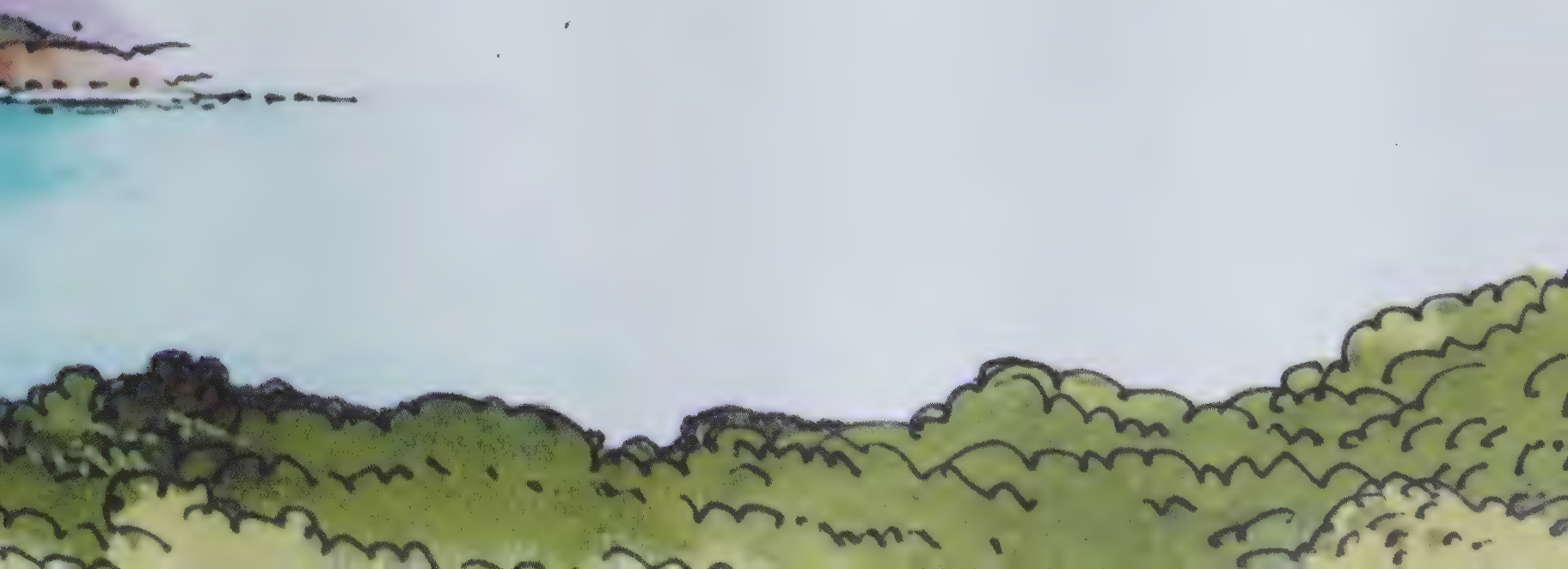
Television reporters are not easily frightened; and this one kept firing questions at the unhappy millionaire. "Well, never mind about all the others," he said. "What would you like to do with the million? What's the one thing you could buy, which would bring you the most happiness?"

The millionaire didn't have to think too hard about that one. "A beautiful place, that's what I want. Beautiful surroundings to live in." This is what millionaires want the most: beauty. As soon as they 'strike it rich', off they go ...

looking for a place with lovely views and landscapes of forest, open sky, ocean, islands: in fact all the things the children of the Andamans and Nicobars have in their own backyard. So, they are millionaires! And, without the headache of having to win a lottery and put up with jealousy, advice and television reporters.

There's no doubt about it. The Andamans and Nicobars are on top of the list of the Earth's most beautiful and scenic places. Their beauty has been praised in poems, novels, paintings, photographs, articles and speeches, and poetic names invented for them: such as Fortunate, Emerald Isles, Jewels in the Sea, Islands of Paradise, and others. There are many theories about how the names Andamans and Nicobars came into use. We Indians like the explanation that Andaman comes from 'Handuman', the Malay word for Hanuman. Apparently, Malay slaves called the Andaman people Rakshasas and Hanumans, from the *Ramayana*. It may have come from 'Angamanian', an ancient name given by early explorers and travellers around the ninth century. Even earlier, the second century explorer Claudius Ptolemy had called the Andamans people 'Agmnatae', and the Nicobarese 'Anthropophagi'. Each author has his own little story to explain names. For example, one book says that 'Narcondam' is a Malay word, while another says it comes from the Sanskrit 'Narak Kund' or pit of hell. The Nicobars were often referred to as the 'land of the naked' by travellers and this is perhaps the origin of its name ('Nakkavur' in Hindi). In those early days of exploration and discovery, it must have been a lot of fun! Many new places to find, to name and to describe for the first time. Since no one else was likely to visit those new places, they could exaggerate as much as they liked.

But the real value of the Andamans and Nicobars goes far beyond their beauty. There are unique features that make it a very special place and one that must be protected at any cost. Why? Well, the geologist and the geographer would say that, among other things, the only Indian volcano is located here. The zoologist would probably shout out his answer: there are hundreds of mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians in the islands that are endemic (found nowhere else). The botanist would remind us about the 200 endemic flowering plants. But



the most important statements would come from the anthropologist and ecologist. The anthropologist would say: Look, forget about the endemic frogs and birds; we have endemic people here! The Andamanese, Jarawa, Sentinelese, Shompen, Onge and Nicobarese are endemic cultures, found only in this one tiny spot and nowhere else on Earth.

And now the most important 'ologist' bangs the table loudly. He is the ecologist, who says: Listen; the Andaman-Nicobar archipelago is one of the biodiversity 'hot spots' of the world. Biodiversity means the range of plants and animals living within one area. A 'hot spot' is a place where the biodiversity is very high, with hundreds or even thousands of living things sharing a habitat or natural area. A city suburb would have a low biodiversity; one would see just one or two squirrels and birds, some insects, maybe a frog or two, a variety of trees. But in a high biodiversity area like the Andaman and Nicobar rainforests, there is a population explosion of different species of insects, birds, plants, reptiles, amphibians and mammals. In fact, rainforests have the highest biodiversity of any ecosystem in the world, and these magic islands still have some precious undisturbed rainforest left.

One afternoon at Ariel Bay, North Andaman, Annamalai and I stood quietly in a patch of rainforest, looking skywards. Up there, about thirty metres above our astonished heads, was the canopy or tree-top. From somewhere deep inside it, came the sad hooting of an owl, not happy about being woken up during the day. The cause of irritation was a group of flying foxes or fruit bats, which were creating a racket about something or the other. The umbrella-like canopy had many other birds too, including parakeets, pigeons and barbets. A

woodpecker was hunting insects, hammering away at the tree trunk with its beak, hard enough to give anyone a bad headache. The woodpecker can tolerate this violent battering because of a soft spongy substance in its skull, which breaks the force of the head-banging and prevents the bird from going into a coma.

We spent a long time at the tree, and saw a cat snake, four species of lizards, and many insects including some beautiful butterflies and a large moth that was sitting very still and trying to pretend it was part of the tree trunk. On the soft, humus-packed ground, frogs called and leeches made their hungry way towards our feet. That fig tree was like a whole little world with at least fifty species of animals living on its branches and trunk.

But the rainforest is just one of several important ecosystems of the typical Andaman-Nicobar islands. Beyond is the mangrove belt, with its crazy tangle of aerial roots that look like crowds of waving arms and dancing legs.

Mangrove trees are very special. Their habitat is sea water and salty soil: both dangerous, actually fatal, for ordinary trees. But mangroves are not ordinary trees. They have evolved special organs and habits to deal with their salty lives. For example, their funny-looking 'prop roots' have pores with which they breathe in air, since the soil has very little oxygen. Their roots also filter out salt, and so do the leaves. The leaves can store salt, and taste very salty indeed.

The mangrove forest and adjoining creeks are the home of the saltwater crocodile, the largest predator in the islands and also, the largest reptile in the world. 'Salties' or saltwater crocodiles grow to 7 metres in length, but the average, day to

day 'saltie' is 3 or 4 metres. In spite of their size they can move incredibly fast and even gallop like a horse for short distances. They play an important role in keeping the environment balanced and healthy. The fact that they eat predatory fish helps us humans very directly, because these predator fish feed on the smaller species that we like to eat. It has been found in many countries that when crocodiles are wiped out of an area, the fishing industry suffers because the fish catch decreases noticeably.

Beyond the mangrove belt is the beach, often with white sand which looks like a ring of ice from a distance. This is where sea turtles nest. Four species of sea turtles nest in the Andamans and Nicobars: the green, the olive ridley, the hawksbill and the giant, almost 1,000 kg, leatherback. The life of the sea turtle is full of mystery. Scientists haven't been able to answer many important questions about them in spite of having spent millions of dollars and millions of hours in observation and research. Perhaps we humans try too hard to find out every little thing about every little animal. Some things should remain, and will remain, unknown and mysterious. When man invaded the moon, many people around the world felt that science had robbed them of the poetic mystery of the heavens. Do you agree?

Have you ever seen a sea turtle nesting? If you get a chance to, don't miss it. The nesting season is from October to March in the islands. It's a tough job for marine animals to walk on land; and the female sea turtle has to do much more than just walk. Her job is to dig a hole in the sand, lay 100 to 200 eggs, cover them up, make a 'false nest' (to fool predators) and waddle back into the ocean totally exhausted, glad she's a marine animal and not a terrestrial one.

The baby turtles, only as big as an idli or puri and not much heavier either, hatch about sixty days later and scramble away into the sea. One of the big turtle mysteries is that the mother turtle returns to nest and lay her eggs on the very same beach where she hatched, many many years ago. How does she find her way back there? How does she remember the route? The ocean is vast and she may be living in a part of it thousands of miles away. Obviously they have some

technology way above that which our human brains can understand.

One discovery that scientists have made about the eggs of crocodiles and sea turtles, is very interesting. We used to believe that the number of males and females in a nest, or the male-female ratio, is decided by the genes and chromosomes in the embryo or un-hatched animal. But recent studies on these two animals, crocodiles and sea turtles, have shown that it is the nest temperature which makes the hatchling a girl or boy! Isn't that interesting? Mother Nature regulates the nest temperature so as to produce the right number of males and females.

Beyond the beautiful beaches are the coral reefs, a kaleidoscope of colour and shape. The waters of these islands are crystal-clear, so we are able to see corals and fish from the surface without having to dive down. But you have probably seen a lot of pictures, posters and books about coral reefs. The Forest Department exhibition at Wandoor has specimens of many species of coral and all the other animals and plants that inhabit these 'rainforests of the ocean', as reefs have been called.

This four-layer ecosystem—the rainforest, mangrove, beach and reef, is the typical Andaman and Nicobar island. Because of these fantastic habitats within such close range of one another, the islands' biodiversity is extremely high, one of the highest in the world.

GENIUSES NOT JUNGLEES

I have talked about the silly habit of calling the Jarawa, Onge and other tribes of the Andamans and Nicobars 'junglees'. If we call them 'junglees' and look down on them, then we are junglees, not they. Social scientists (scientists who study people and cultures) all over the world are amazed at how much indigenous people know about their environment and how wisely they use it. It's not an easy business at all, to be self-sufficient! We are so used to running to the shops for everything. But a tribe like the Shompen or Sentinelese has to find, or make, everything it needs. This includes food, clothes, medicines, ornaments, weapons of defence, games and entertainment.

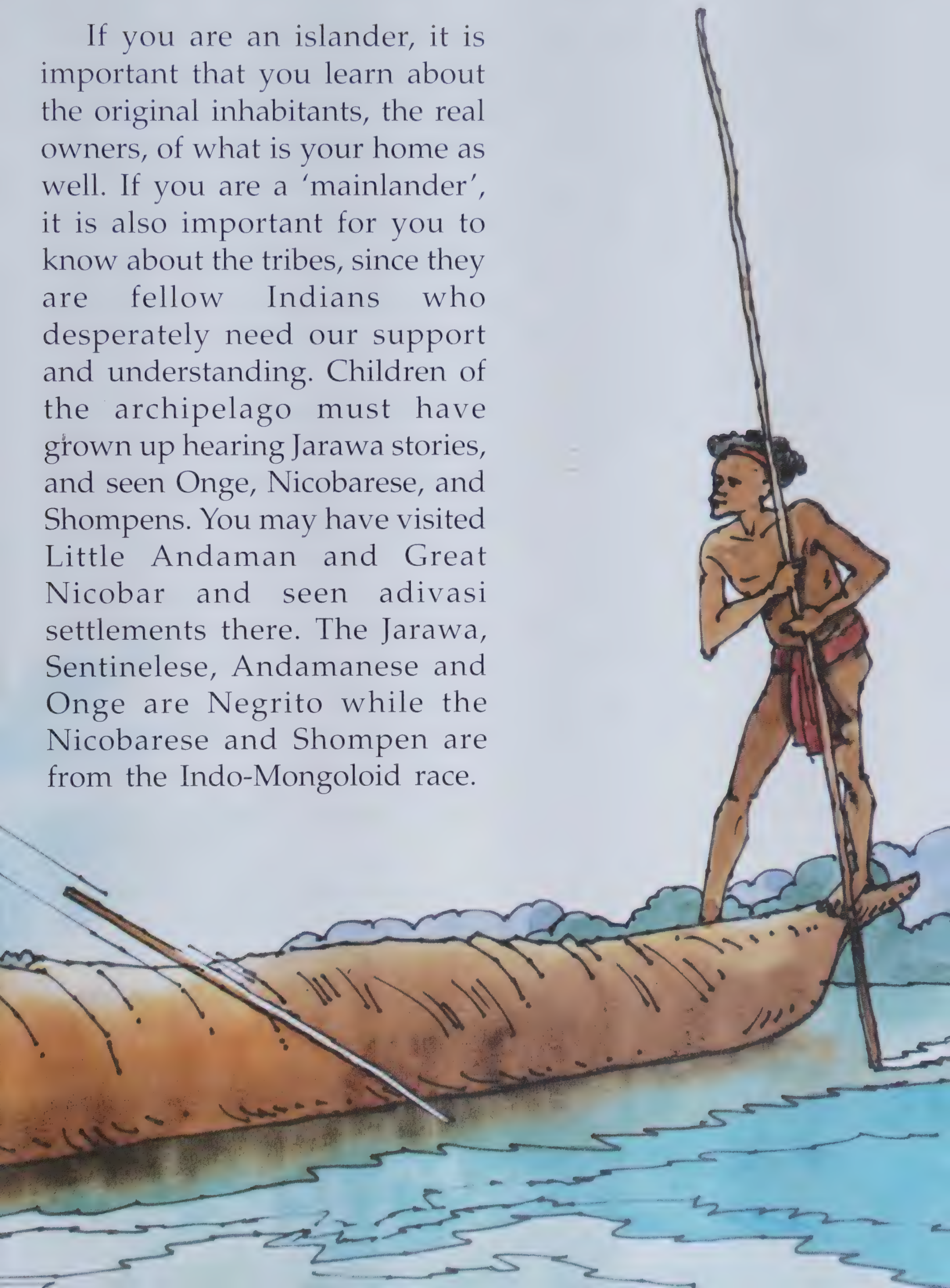
Not easy! How long would you or I be able to survive on an uninhabited island? A day or two? A week? What would we have to do first? Probably build a shelter for ourselves. Well, that sounds easy, doesn't it? But we would quickly discover that even the simple act of cutting poles—to use as supports for our shelter—is extremely difficult! Ever tried cutting a stout branch? Or even a thin one? You need a very sharp instrument, and strong muscles. Even if we did manage to cut poles, we wouldn't know how to weave leaves together to make a roof. We would not know about making string,

using the inner bark of certain varieties of vines and creepers. Or, that quartz flakes can be used for shaving and slicing, and that the inner valves of some shells may be used as knives. Needless to say, we would never be able to make sleeping mats from strips of cane bark. We would probably mess it all up quite badly, and the shelter would fall on our heads on the very first night.

We would by then be terribly hungry and start missing all the junk food we eat, which is so bad for us but which we are addicted to. We would decide to go hunting in the hope of catching a bird or pig or anything else to chomp on, but we would probably trip and fall down so often that we would give up. Finally, in desperation, we might grab a passing crab and decide to eat that, and then remember that oh! We don't know how to make a fire! While our schools teach us geometry and other such things, they don't teach us important skills such as how to build a quick shelter, make fire, or tell the time of day without a watch. Don't you think these are lessons we should be taught?

So, let us accept that we are incapable of living in the jungle. Let us remind ourselves that the Andaman and Nicobar tribes not only survive, but have interesting and action-packed lives, with song and dance, religious beliefs, strong family ties and friendships … all the things that make our own lives rich and full. We tend to think of hunter-gatherers as tough, rather heartless people who have no time or interest in relationships and friendships. This is very far from the truth. Their greeting and parting rituals are long and emotional, they shed tears easily, and marriages are life-long commitments even though the ceremony itself is simple.

If you are an islander, it is important that you learn about the original inhabitants, the real owners, of what is your home as well. If you are a 'mainlander', it is also important for you to know about the tribes, since they are fellow Indians who desperately need our support and understanding. Children of the archipelago must have grown up hearing Jarawa stories, and seen Onge, Nicobarese, and Shompens. You may have visited Little Andaman and Great Nicobar and seen adivasi settlements there. The Jarawa, Sentinelese, Andamanese and Onge are Negrito while the Nicobarese and Shompen are from the Indo-Mongoloid race.



Let us learn some basic facts about these six groups of the original citizens of the Andaman and Nicobar islands. Considering our 200-year old connection with the tribes, only a small, almost laughable amount is known about them. Also, some of what has been written, may not be true at all. There were many so-called anthropologists, who have made 'observations' that put everyone on the wrong path. For example, for a long time sounding-boards were mistaken for shields, and a bamboo shelf used to store meat was thought to be a stove, or grill.

Let us start with the Jarawa, since they have been in the news quite a lot recently. No one knows where the Jarawa came from or how long they have been in the Andamans; it could be as long as twenty or thirty thousand years. Anthropologists debate the origin of the tribes. The Jarawas are certainly Negritos, which is a particular race of people found mostly in some African countries. Negritos are generally short, with beautiful dark skin. They have very curly hair: the kind many women love, and which has become popular in places such as New York and London. However, the Jarawas and Sentinelese don't need to go to the hairdresser and pay huge sum of money, because they are born with these fashionable hairstyles.

The Jarawas have, as far as possible, stayed away from the outside world. When provoked, they have responded with arrows. Sadly, we haven't respected their wishes and today, our worst fears have been realised: they are becoming beggars and tramps in their own homeland.

Jarawa men wear a bark chest-guard which protects them from injuries and sudden jolts, and is also a 'store room' for

small tools such as knives and arrows. The women wear a waist girdle with hanging leaf tassels. The children are usually naked, which makes it easy for them to jump into the sea for a quick swim or climb a tree without worrying about tearing or dirtying their clothes. Ornaments including headbands, necklaces, waistbands and armlets are made out of shell, leaves, bark and other forest materials. Nylon rope found on beaches has become a part of Jarawa ornaments and clothing, as has the red cloth given to them as presents by the government.

The Jarawas spend a lot of time collecting food. Their 'pantry' and 'supermarket' is a strip of land which extends along the west coast of the South and Middle Andaman islands. It includes rainforest, mangroves, and a long coast where they can catch fish, shellfish and crabs at low tide. They also dig up and eat yams, roots and tubers. Jarawa medicines include wild ginger for fevers and coughs, and one can see from their tough, healthy bodies that their nutrition and healthcare is excellent. It is said that their teeth are like a box of tools, and can cut, tear, chew and puncture anything. Breadfruit is torn apart and chewed vigorously to convert the fibre into fat.

People who have seen the Jarawa swim, believe that they must be among the fastest swimmers in the world and, with some training, could even break the Olympic record. They go through the water like speedboats, and can swim for long distances.

The second tribe is the Sentinelese who live on the little island of North Sentinel and may be the most isolated and pure human race in the world. Where did they come from, and who are they? Perhaps they were, originally, a group of Andamanese; they are taller than the Jarawa, and have different features.

Their bows are similar to those of the Jarawa. Anthropologists believe the Sentinelese may have settled here fifteen or twenty thousand years ago. Their population was estimated at about a hundred ten years ago. We don't really know much more than this about the Sentinelese. Their refusal to be drawn into the outside world has to be admired. It is a wonderful thought, that their whole world is the sixty square mile island of North Sentinel, which is their home. Cruising along in their dugout canoes, they hunt for shellfish and fish among the rocks at low tide, and shoot at outsiders from tree perches. An undisturbed, isolated human population is a tremendous treasure and we must guard and protect it as best as we can.

The Andamanese tribe, with about a dozen *septs* or sub-tribes such as the *Yerega* and the *Aka-Bea*, were the first indigenous people with whom the outsiders came into contact. This was when the British established a penal settlement on South Andaman in 1858. At that time, the total Andamanese population was between four and six thousand; we don't know the exact figure. Each *sept* or group had a different language and sub-culture and though there was some contact and barter between the septs, they led separate lives. Some were coastal, and lived mostly by catching turtle and fish; others were inland people who lived on forest produce. They were experts in bird and animal hunting, and had different arrows for different species depending on its size, habits and speed. For example to hunt a pig, they had a heavily barbed blade on the arrow.

Hunting changed dramatically when they were given some of the stray dogs which roamed about the settlement. They began using packs of these mongrels to hunt larger prey, such as pig and monitor lizard.

Another big change in hunting came when the Andamanese, and the other tribes, discovered iron, which replaced shell, fish bone, wood, stone and other natural substances in their hunting weapons and tools. Harpoons now had iron heads, filed and shaped with coral stone. Shipwrecks, with their generous supply of iron, changed the culture of the Andaman and Nicobar tribes. Unlike the Jarawa, the Andamanese did not know how to make fire, and had to carry smouldering logs as they moved from one hunting camp to another. One of their old legends was about how fire was stolen from Heaven, a theme and story found in many ancient cultures.

The sudden and tragic death of the Andamanese tribe left little time to study their culture and habits. As always, there was more of an effort to convert them to 'civilisation' than to learn from them. I will mention just two Andamanese habits of special interest. The first is 'body painting' which is an important ritual associated with special occasions like the turtle festival. A kind of white clay is used which is believed to have medicinal properties as well. Another important activity was scarifying, which means lightly cutting the skin, in patterns, with a piece of glass or stone. The medical belief associated with scarifying is that the loss of blood makes one stronger and new blood rejuvinates the body and helps prevent disease. (Leeches were part of the English doctor's kit in the 18th and 19th centuries, and 'leeching' a patient was a routine medical treatment.)

Moving further south to the island of Little Andaman, we come to another fascinating ancient culture, that of the Onge. Little Andaman, their home island, is on a busy sea route and

the Onge were suspicious of ships and their crews, with good reason: slave and pirate ships operated on this island as well. We do not know how many Onge were carried off as slaves or what other terrible activities went on here, because there is no written record of the early history of the Andamans or the Nicobars. But it seems pretty certain that the Nicobars were often the base for Malay pirates, and slave ships regularly swooped down on the Andamans. When the Onge reacted by attacking—usually a ship's crew that came ashore for water or repair—they were severely punished by the crew. In one such raid by the British government, seventy Onge were killed and five British officers awarded the Victoria Cross for 'bravery'.

We know much more about the language, habits and beliefs of the Onge than the Jarawa or Andamanese. This is because several social scientists, including the Italian anthropologist Lidio Cipriani, have lived with them and studied their culture. They have written about the Onges' amazing knowledge of the forest and its resources. For example, they use a particular plant as a bee repellent, when taking down beehives for honey. Wild honey is rich in vitamins and minerals, and has a high nutritional value. The Onge are world-renowned hunters and fishermen. They catch fish not with fishing lines or harpoons, but with bows and arrows, even shooting active, jumping fish in heavy surf.

They are warm and loving people. Their greeting isn't just a 'hi' or a smile, but much more elaborate. They sit on each others' lap, touch and caress, and even shed tears of happiness.

The most well-known feature of Onge culture is their fishing prowess and intricate body painting, with red ochre or white clay. The red paste is prepared with pig or turtle fat. While red ochre is used on sad occasions like deaths, the white clay, mixed with water, is a happy ornament for festivals, marriages and successful hunts. The designs are geometric and done in the 'etching' style. Clay is spread over a portion of the body and designs etched or scraped in it with fingernails or twigs. Body painting is the Onge woman's special job, a way to show her love and admiration for her husband or other family members. White clay is also an insect repellent and pain reliever, often used for headaches.

We have all seen pictures of the Onges' homes, called *gaiborale-beyra* which means forest. This beehive construction is like a large cozy umbrella and is made of wood, cane and palm leaves. It is a monsoon dormitory, rain-proof and comfortable with rows of raised platforms. The *korale* or temporary hut is a simple shelter of a palm leaf roof supported on poles. Pottery is another Onge feature. Onge pots are of the 'coiled' style, in which ropes of clay are curled round and round to make a container.

The most successful tribe in the Andamans and Nicobars is the Nicobarese, with a population of 20,000 individuals. While the others have suffered from disease and some other problems as a result of outside contact, the Nicobarese have flourished, adapted, and multiplied. They have also been treated much better by the other communities living around

them, while the Jarawa and Onge are often looked down upon and ridiculed. And as I write this, a terrible thought comes to mind that I want to share with you.

The Nicobarese are not Negritos but of the Indo-Mongoloid race, with fair skin, straight hair, and slightly slanting eyes. It is easy to mistake a Nicobarese for an Indian from the north-east, or a Myanmarese or Malay or Indonesian. Could it be that they were, and are, treated better than the Negrito tribes because they are light-skinned rather than dark? This is definitely something to think about, because people the world over have a strange preference for fairer complexions. It is more so in some countries than others and India is definitely one of them.

Another advantage the Nicobarese had was that they had been traders even in the past. As a result of this, they had always been in touch with the outside world. They weren't as isolated and remote as the Jarawa or Onge, whose minds and bodies were unable to withstand the sudden entry of the new and aggressive cultures. Also, the Nicobarese were traditionally agriculturists and herders as well as hunters, unlike the other groups. The Nicobarese live on twelve islands in the Nicobars, and many are now educated and moving out to other parts of the archipelago and to the mainland to pursue jobs and careers. They are Christians and Bishop Richardson, their famous leader, is the one-man reason why the Nicobarese are well organised, educated and politically aware. Bishop John Richardson was the representative of the Andamans and Nicobars in the first Indian parliament.

The present Nicobarese culture is very different from what it was even a hundred years ago. Clothing, rituals, beliefs,

food and other cultural habits have changed drastically. But there is a vast difference in the people and their lives as you travel from island to island. There are many languages, and one Nicobarese may not be able to communicate with another unless they have been to school and learnt Car Nicobarese. While people on one island may dress in jeans and T-shirts and sing hymns in church, something very different—and far more precious—is happening fifty kilometres away. A Nicobarese man in traditional dress made of bark and shells, is kneeling over a wooden *fetish* or idol, and spirits are being exorcised or driven away by a *Tomiluono* or witchdoctor.

The Shompen are the luckiest of the Andaman-Nicobar people, at least I think so. They live on the island of Great Nicobar, a land of beautiful perennial streams and rivers, hills, valleys and forests. Also of the Mongoloid race, they look different from the Nicobarese and have a distinct language of their own. However they are shy and timid and resisted outside contact as long as they could.

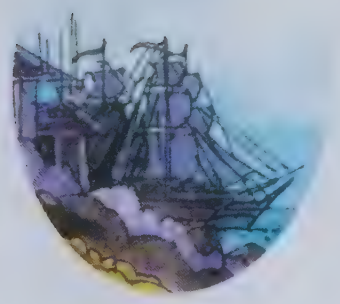
Located just 145 kilometres from the north of the Indonesian island of Sumatra, Great Nicobar has a rich and distinct biodiversity including many endemic species like the megapode. The Shompen move from place to place looking for seasonally available food which includes larvae, turtle eggs, and pandanus. Honey is a vitamin-rich food and is collected after smearing a certain kind of powdered bark on themselves as a protection against the angry bees. The Shompen are master anglers, using harpoons to spear fish with unparalleled skill. They do not use hand-nets or any other type of fishing net. Like the Nicobarese, the Shompen are also cultivators. Many groups raise pigs and tend small gardens of pandanus. Sadly, their knowledge of the forest and ocean is quickly vanishing as most of them are now dependent on 'welfare' and are fast losing their traditional lifestyle and skills.

Shompen homes are often built on slopes, near a stream or river. They are raised on stilts, with a ladder entry. The space below is fenced in for pigs. Traditionally, and until recently, all Shompen wore pieces of bark cloth, made by beating and soaking strips of bark. When it becomes pliable it is stretched out to dry and fashioned into whatever style and size of garment is needed. Among many other fascinating aspects about the Shompen, is the fact that they produce fire

by friction between pieces of wood. A rod is made from dry Inbot wood and churned and rubbed into another piece with a groove. The dust thus raised, catches fire.

As you can see, the six tribes of the Andaman and Nicobar islands are very distinct from one another, whether it is their language, family structures or culture, such as music and dance, and style of living. While some know how to make fire, others don't and must protect fire at all cost, often carrying resin torches and smouldering cinders with them. Their boats vary, from the simple rafts of the Jarawa to the elaborate Nicobarese canoes, with carved prows.

Time is often marked and measured by the movement of the tides, an obvious 'clock' for coastal communities. Religious beliefs and customs have some interesting common threads; ancestor worship, for instance, seems to be a strong link, and worship of the sun, moon and other heavenly bodies. Each tribe has its own religion; so when we say India has five or six religions, we are very wrong. We have many more than that, and this adds to the cultural wealth of India. The next time someone asks how many religions we have, remember to say 'hundreds'.



PIRATES AND PIONEERS

The Andamans and Nicobars are located on one of the great commercial seaways of the world. In the days when goods were transported only by ship, these islands played a very important role in trade. Ships had to pass them as they plied between western countries and the big trade centres of Burma, India, and the far East. In the earliest written history of these islands, it is recorded that ships would stop at regular points for fuel. They anchored in many sheltered bays such as Port Blair, to fuel up or repair engines, to hide from violent sea storms or simply take a break from sea-sickness. They explored the beautiful beaches and forests. The Andamans and Nicobars were often the sailors' first sight of land after many, many weeks at sea. For ship-bound people, what a temptation it must have been, to go ashore and stand on firm ground again! Have you ever been on a long sea journey? After the first three or four days it can get pretty bad, especially if you feel sea-sick!

There were two kinds of ships: cargo ships, and passenger ships. Many of the cargo ships were owned by the British, bringing goods from England to sell in India. They took back cotton, spices, gold, silver, precious stones, timber and many of our special national treasures such as the Kohinoor

diamond. They carried back bales of cotton yarn (thread), made it into cloth in their British mills and sold it back to the Indian market. Not a very fair deal, but colonists are often very unfair. They usually think more about themselves than about the people they are ruling. Later, when the British colony had been established in the Andamans, huge blocks of Padauk and other hardwoods were shipped to England, and even used to make furniture for Buckingham Palace.

However, all this happened much later. Let us go back to the earliest history of the Andamans and Nicobars. Actually, we can't really call it history, because it's more a mix of imagination, exaggeration, lies and dreams. Many early 'descriptions' of the islands had long and fanciful accounts of their indigenous inhabitants, who were often reported to be sub-human and savage cannibals. Of course, it must have been a horrid shock for a ship's crew to be suddenly attacked on an island they thought was safe and uninhabited! Strong little warriors running out of the dark, sinister jungle with bows and arrows ... It must have been a frightening experience, enough to send travellers' imagination racing ahead of the actual truth.

Look at this sentence for a minute, written by two Arab travellers and translated by Eusebius Renaudut: "... the people of this coast eat human flesh quite raw; their complexion is black, their hair frizzled, their countenance (face) and eyes frightful ..." And another 'factual' account states that their heads grew beneath their shoulders!

Marco Polo, the 13th century traveller, wrote this about the Andamans in AD 1290: "Angamanain is a very long island. The people are without a king, and are idolators, and no better than wild beasts. And I assure you all the men of this island

of Angamanain have heads like dogs, and teeth and eyes likewise ... and eat everybody that they can catch, if not of their own race."

Fifty or sixty years later, travellers were at least ready to accept that the people of these islands were human and not animals or monsters, but the attitude to their culture and lifestyle remained pretty bad. This is what a British report of 1859 said about the wonderful forest dwellers of this area: "It is impossible to imagine any human being lower in the scale of civilisation than are the Andaman savages."

By now, colonists from Denmark were eyeing this part of the world. The Danish government had formed a settlement in the Nicobars in 1756, and then abandoned it twelve years later

because of illness and death due to malaria. But the Nicobars, they could see, was a valuable place to have control over, and in 1833 a Danish 'Governor' was appointed to take charge.

In those days, about two hundred years ago, countries such as England, Denmark and France were powerful colonial powers. They had strong naval ships and their representatives would plant their country's flag at places that were good trading (and plundering) spots, and where no one else seemed to be in charge. It was also a time when travel was dangerous and uncertain. There was no cure for malaria, cholera and other tropical diseases. Ships were primitive and had a habit of breaking down. Hostile tribes like the Andamanese might decide to put an arrow through you. If you were smart, you stayed home.

But, on the other hand, what an exciting time it was for the brave and adventurous traveller! The world was still full of undiscovered and unexplored places and you could come home and announce that you had found a new country or island, or even a continent! Being able to do that would be worth a lot of hardship and frightening experiences. You could also cook up all sorts of strange stories because there was no way anyone could check up on you. No telephone or radio or television or email or international newspapers and magazines. People were also very gullible, ready to believe anything. Some were quite sure that the Earth was flat and you could fall off the edge if you walked far enough. Or that an eclipse meant that the moon had swallowed up the sun.

Some of the early travellers, who wrote about the Andaman Nicobar archipelago, were I'Tsing (AD 672), Marco Polo (AD 1286), Friar Odoric (AD 1322) and Nicola Conti (AD 1430).

Most of them were travelling just for the fun of it. But there were business travellers too. These traders made frequent visits, and most of them were Malays, Burmese and Chinese.

One of the prized goods found in the Andamans were edible birds' nests, which are very popular in China and other far-eastern countries. These birds' nests are made into a soup or a dessert. The nest is made by a small, fast-flying bird called a swiftlet. Its saliva is a specialised building material and hardens into a clay-like substance, with which the bird shapes a secure little nest. Birds' nest traders soon got to know the nesting places of these swiftlets, usually rock caves near the seashore. They also knew that the birds built two or three nests each year, and that the quality of the first one was the best. Ornithologists (people who study birds) say that the second and third nests are built when the first one is taken away, and are often spotted with blood. During the British occupation of the Andamans, edible-nest caves were leased out to traders to avoid conflict, but there were sometimes 'nest wars', when more than one trader was going after the same cave.

Another popular trade item was *beche de mer* or sea cucumber. Lying on the ocean floor in shallow waters, this strange animal looks like a long, unwashed sock filled with sand. Sun-dried, this too is a far-east delicacy. Traders made good money from sea cucumbers.

There was however, another explorer on this seaway, even more colourful and adventurous than the tourist and trader. He was the pirate, who was having a busy time because there were plenty of ships to loot. There is much talk in the old travel accounts about Malay pirates. They attacked the trading ships and passenger ships that passed their way. There were

plenty of wild, uninhabited islands for them to hide on and wait for the arrival of some richly laden ship. Pirates were after guns, jewels, gold, silver, and other valuables.

The slave traders or 'blackbirders' were pirates, mostly Malays, who stole people and sold them into slavery. Old English writers refer to them as Sea Gypsies and to the Malays they were *Orang Laut*. Slavery was an accepted fact of life in those times, and dark people around the world were kidnapped, imprisoned, bound in handcuffs, chained and shipped away. Some became farm labourers, and the most famous of these were, of course, the African slaves in the United States of America. Slaves were also given as gifts to royalty, and many Andaman slaves were presented to the kings of Cambodia, China, Burma, Indonesia and elsewhere. There are records of their presence in the Siamese (Thai) court in

the 1860s. Some even ended up in England, and Europe. Slave children were valuable because they took up less space and were easier to transport. Also, they did not get as distressed and homesick as adults. They could be trained more easily, because children learn faster than adults.

Imagine the scene on a beach or coastal forest, as a slave ship anchors off an island with peaceful Andamanese, Jarawa, or Onge fishing and hunting camps. A gang of black-birders, protected by gunfire or under pretence of being friendly, go ashore and captures four or five of the 'natives'. The captives are put in fetters (leg chains) and locked up in a special, secure place on the ship. Imagine the feelings with which they see the last of their beloved home, family, tribe! Imagine the agony of those on shore, watching their loved ones being taken away to a fate worse than death. We cannot be surprised, then, that the Andaman and Nicobar tribes, especially the Negrito groups, have been 'hostile', and eager to stay away from 'civilised' people like us.

It is interesting to note that as early as 1789, Lieutenant Blair observed that the Andamanese and Jarawa knew about, and feared, firearms. It was quite an accepted thing to molest, kidnap, enslave, and generally harass the indigenous people.

We carelessly use the word 'hostile' to describe the Negrito tribes. But it is important that we see, and understand, the roots of this hostility. It is most definitely fear; and the fear comes from the way they have been treated in the past. They must have seen that strangers bring death in the form of gunfire and disease. The Jarawa and Onge must have noted, with fear, the sudden and dramatic decline of the Andamanese after they became friendly with the convict settlements on

Ross and Chatham islands. Perhaps they decided not to make the same mistake. And it was a good decision.

Among the spicy Andaman and Nicobar stories that were told and re-told many a time were tales of gold and silver in great quantities, just waiting to be found. There is a particularly wonderful one, of a ship hitting a storm and being beached in the Nicobars. The 'natives' brought them fresh water to drink, and some spilt on parts of the ship's anchor. And lo and behold! Those parts of the anchor turned to gold! There were also stories about water which produced gold, though exactly how this happened remained a mystery. However, there are always gullible people ready to believe fairy tales and many were disappointed, even killed, looking for gold on the islands. One of them, Dr Helfer, set off to fill his pockets with Nicobar gold in 1839 and was killed during his sad and silly journey. There was another mad pioneer called Mr Quigley, who was not after gold but shipwrecks and coconuts. He wrote, around 1850, a flowery account of tigers, leopards and other creatures he had encountered ... in his imagination!

HOISTING THE UNION JACK

The year 1789 was a historic one for the Andamans and Nicobars. A fleet of five ships was making its slow way from Calcutta—then the capital of the British government in India—to the Andaman islands. The names of these ships tickles the imagination: *Atlanta, Perseverance, Ariel, Rangat* and *Viper*. Some of these names are familiar to children of the islands because several bays, islands, creeks and other land forms are named after these early explorer-ships.

The fleet was under the command of Lieutenant Archibald Blair of the Indian Navy, and he himself was in the *Atlanta*. He would, on behalf of the British government, hoist their flag, the Union Jack, in the territory of the Andamans and Nicobars. Lieutenant Blair had been asked to survey the Andamans and find the most suitable location in which to start a small settlement. It would serve as a shelter for ships in storms or in times of war. The indigenous people, who were seen as hostile and uncooperative, must be tamed and 'civilised'. The third part of the plan was to make it a penal settlement and move in convicts from Burma.

Lieutenant Blair was exploring unknown parts of the world and with him was Lieutenant Colebrook of the Bengal Engineers. Blair's job wasn't easy. He had to navigate and map

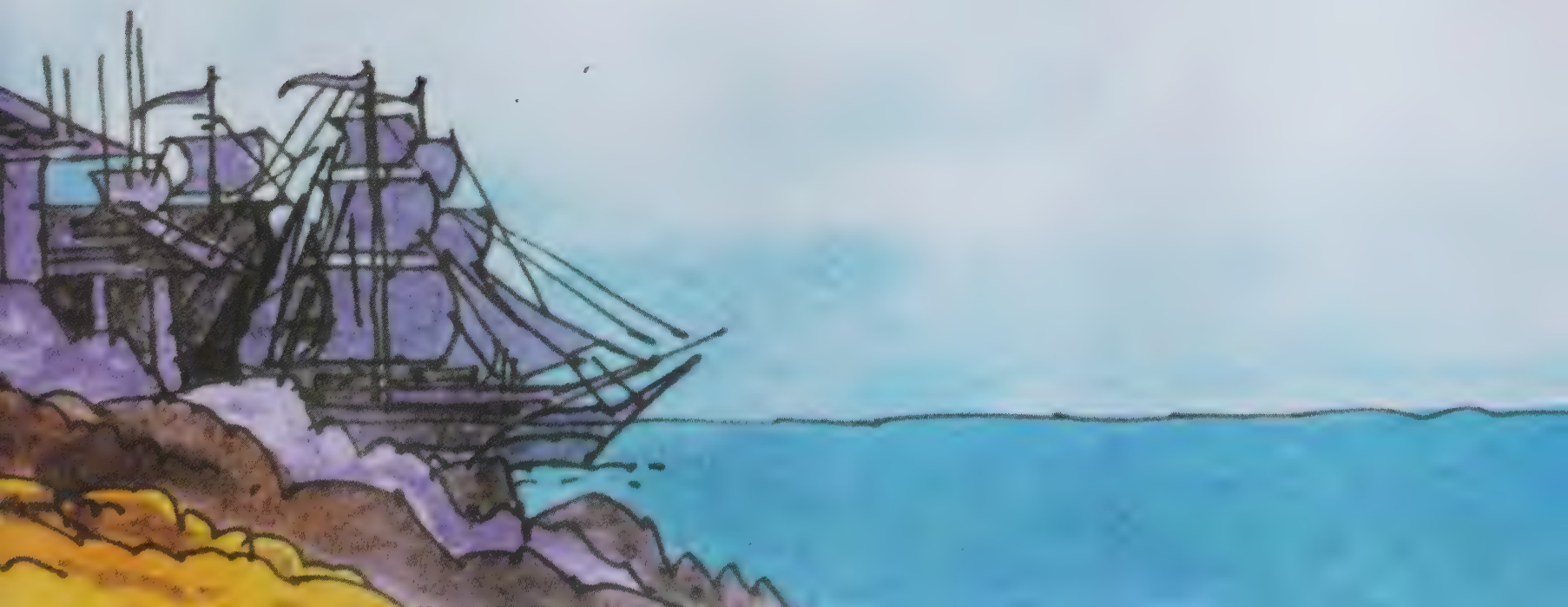
the zigzag Andaman coast, often in stormy weather. There was engine trouble, and attacks by the Andamanese. But Lieutenant Blair was a highly competent, brave and experienced surveyor (some of his surveys are still used). He showed his knowledge and wisdom in choosing a bay on the east coast of South Andaman as the site of the new settlement. It was named Port Cornwallis, in honour of the naval commander, Sir William Cornwallis (the brother of Lord Cornwallis, the Governor General of India).

Well, that wasn't the end of Lieutenant Blair's job. The government asked him to stay on in the Andamans and start the settlement. By August 1790 he had cleared large tracts of Port Cornwallis and planted fruit trees, vegetables and grass. Provisions were sent to his pioneering team from Calcutta and Penang. Houses were built for the 119 labourers, a storehouse and a hospital as well. Lieutenant Blair had all sorts of ideas about how the forest and its resources could be used, and sent samples of Andaman woods to Calcutta, suggesting Padauk might make a good dye! Little did he know that Padauk was a valuable hardwood and would one day become the mainstay of the Andamans economy. Padauk was shipped to the mainland for telegraph poles, railway sleepers and roof beams; and tons of Andaman wood was taken by people to England to beautify the homes, palaces and offices of important people.

From the official reports of this exploration and settlement, it seems that the Jarawa were quite friendly to the outsiders. It was the *Aka Bea sept* of the Andamanese that gave Lieutenant Blair and his team some sleepless nights, by raiding and attacking the convicts and officers.

The settlement was taking shape and Lieutenant Blair had recommended that Ross, a small blob of an island within sight of Port Cornwallis, be 'opened up' as well. Then in 1792, suddenly and mysteriously, the government decided to abandon Port Cornwallis and move everyone to Ariel Bay, a harbour on north Andaman. It is hard to understand why this was done, but governments often make decisions that we cannot understand. Perhaps it was felt that the climate was healthier and the northern harbour was a bigger and better place than Port Cornwallis. Perhaps because it was a more convenient maritime 'rendezvous' (meeting place) in case of war or naval action. Maybe the Andamanese groups up north were friendlier?

Whatever the reason, the order to shift to the north came in 1792. This time the plan was to set up a naval arsenal and Lieutenant Blair was asked to start the job and hand over to Captain Alexander Kyd when he arrived. He was to clear the forest, plant, construct buildings... all the things he'd already had plenty of practice in. The name was shifted along with the people and provisions. The new settlement at Ariel Bay was also called Port Cornwallis. The first, southern colony was now known as Old Harbour.



Lieutenant Blair set off on 4 December 1792, again with a fleet of ships with interesting names: the *June, Union, Cornwallis, Seahorse*. He had with him 360 settlers and six months of provision. But it wasn't smooth sailing at all, because a violent sea storm erupted and the *June* was never heard of again. It remains to this day somewhere at the bottom of the sea, with its crew, 90 settlers, equipment and provisions for the new township.

Lieutenant Blair set about his work, and things went on so well that he was soon ready to expand the pioneer outpost. Around 200 convicts were sent over and housed in separate buildings under watchful guards. On and off, there were European convicts in the Andamans as well. Five 'white' convicts were sent to Port Cornwallis along with this batch, but were returned to the mainland because of the lack of facilities to house them. As we know, Europeans needed 'facilities', while Indians had to manage with almost nothing. Fruit trees came from Sumatra, and meat in the form of turtles and cattle. Coconuts were planted, a granary built. Major Michael Symes, who visited Port Cornwallis in 1794 wrote in his *Embassy to Ava* that there was only a "scanty crop of Indian vegetables". However, the scenery, according to him, was uncommonly striking and grand. By this time Lieutenant Blair had left and Captain Alexander Kyd had taken charge. Major Symes mentions that Captain Kyd had an Andamanese boy "in his service". The British had already begun to see the tribes as free labour, and to bully and enslave them.

Six months later, in June 1793, news arrived that war had broken out between Britain and France. There must have been a fear that geographically remote British outposts would be

attacked by the French navy. The settlement was placed on high alert. More labourers were brought in from Bengal to build a fort on the highest point, an artillery storage, and a walled refuge for women and children.

The war never reached Port Cornwallis but malaria certainly did, and killed over fifty people just in that first year. Malaria was a big killer at that time because its cure, quinine, had not been discovered. The indigenous tribes obviously had both a preventive and a cure, because they were healthy and fit even when living near mosquito paradises like swamps and marshes. As you know, many of the drugs we use today come from the traditional scientific knowledge of the hunter-gatherer communities of our country.

In 1796 the settlement was closed down, as suddenly as it had been moved. Leaving behind the sad graveyard to tell its story, the settlers set sail once more. The 270 remaining convicts were moved to Penang in Malaysia, and the 550 free men, women and children (which included the European artillery and sepoy guard) were transported to the mainland. These numbers give us an idea of the size of the settlement, and the amount of organising it must have involved. To start 'from scratch' in the middle of nowhere, and to feed, house and look after so many people wasn't a small achievement. Orders came that a small ship was to remain there to scare away other colonists, with a change of crew every six months. This was the end of the first attempt to colonise the Andamans. It was definitely not an easy place to populate and develop. Few islands had fresh water, the tribes were suspicious of outsiders (with good reason), and malaria was rampant. The geographical location, 700 kilometres east of mainland India,

made transport and communication a big adventure. It took days and even weeks, to send or receive news.

During Lieutenant Blair's survey and the brief period of settlement (from 1789 to 1796) the outsiders—who were mostly British, Indian and Burmese—had many encounters with the Andamanese and Jarawa. At that time, it wasn't understood that there were four different groups of Negritos in these islands, and they were lumped together under one name ... usually an insulting one like 'natives', 'savages', or 'aborigines'. It was much later that the government's population census report divided them into the Jarawa, Sentinelese, Shompen, Andamanese and Onge. The Andamanese tribe, as you have already read, was made up of a dozen *septs*, some living on the coast and others inland, in the forest.

The old British government reports state, very clearly, that the tribes were not hostile at first. It was only when they were repeatedly attacked and driven from their homes that they became aggressive. To a hunter-gatherer, land is the central element of life. Without enough forest areas to hunt and gather in, there's no food. As the outsiders took over more and more of their land, the tribes' insecurity and fear increased.

After abandoning the settlement in 1796, nothing much happened for the next fifty years. The slave-trading of course went on. There are few written records of this, but enough to show that it was a thriving business and that the death rate was high. But the settlements were gone for the time being, and the tribes must have sighed with relief. The crazy outsiders looked strange and behaved like mad creatures. They cut down trees and used guns on innocent people. They never

shared their personal possessions with others. In indigenous cultures, everyone shares everything; 'mine' and 'yours' are not common words.

But the outside people's ships still passed through, and once in a while broke up in storms and were washed up like huge menacing mythical beasts. The seas around the Andamans and Nicobars have become a graveyard of sunken ships, each with a moving and exciting story of high drama, courage and tragedy. One such is the wreck of the *Emily*. Ironically, this shipwreck was the means of saving the lives of sixteen miserable and foolish Europeans. They were the survivors of a group of fifty men, women and children who had 'settled' on the Cocos islands, after hearing wonderful (and false) accounts of its rich resources and healthy climate. They were struck down by malaria and other ailments, and almost insane with misery and weakness. The crew that set out to find the *Emily* discovered and rescued these poor misguided souls.

The most bizarre ship story of the islands is the double wreck of the *Briton* and *Runymede* in 1844. It is a tale famous in maritime history for its lucky coincidence and for the endurance of those aboard the ship, and could certainly be made into a blockbuster film like the *Titanic*!

The story begins on 12 August 1844, when the *Briton* left Sydney, Australia along with three other ships. They were carrying British soldiers and their families to Calcutta; the *Briton* had a crew of 34, and 430 passengers including 43 children.

The weather was what's called 'dirty' in maritime language: rain, with heavy winds, strong currents, thunder and lightning.

The ships were tossed about in storms and became separated. The *Briton* arrived in Singapore alone, and continued further towards Calcutta.

On the morning of 10 November, everyone on board woke up to dark, thundery storm clouds and gusty winds. By nightfall the wind was really picking up and thunder and lightning boomed and crashed all around the ship. The ocean swells grew higher and the ship began losing course. That night, it 'struck' and the crew thought that was the end. It certainly didn't look very hopeful. Water was gushing in, cabins

were swamped, passengers were washed out on deck, and the dark night was filled with frantic screaming and yelling. But the crew was extraordinarily skilled, and Lady Luck played a part too. Imagine everyone's delight when they found themselves ashore the next morning! They were on land, in the middle of a mangrove swamp. This was enough of a surprise, but there was more to come: they had company! There ahead of them in the misty light of the storm, were the ghostly outlines of another ship.

It was the *Runymede*, which had sailed from England on 20 June with soldiers and a few women and children. It had been a long and difficult journey, one of fear and despair. The *Runymede* was a barque, or bark, which is a multiple-masted sailing ship. It hadn't managed to catch the right winds. Rations had run out and utter despair reigned among the passengers. Well, their ordeal was now over; they, too, had spied a ghostly shadow of a ship not far away. Soon, they were invited on board the *Briton* and fed, clothed and made comfortable. A rescue ship was soon on its way with food and other supplies, and there was an atmosphere of relief and happiness as the wrecks were abandoned and the tired passengers and crews set off for the safety of Calcutta.

KALA PANI

Sixty years went by and once more, the jungle invaded the remnants of buildings and plantations. The black-birders continued their slave-catching activities and the tribes, in retaliation, attacked some who came ashore. These 'attack' stories came in thick and fast, many exaggerated or invented. In January 1853, three seamen of the *Fyze Buksh* were murdered. There were reports of an English woman and her child being killed in Camorta. In 1856, eight Chinese traders—probably after birds' nests—were reportedly killed, either by the Onge or the Andamanese. Down south in the Nicobars, the Danish government had retreated in 1847, after many missionaries and government people had died of cholera and malaria.

The British *sahibs* felt increasingly uncomfortable about this vast unprotected sea-way. By 1856, they were ready to have another try at colonising the islands, in order to protect their ships and crews from storms, pirates and the 'natives'. As owners of this group of islands, the British believed that they had their duties as well as rights, and there were strong voices demanding that something be done. One of these loud voices belonged to Captain Henry Hopkinson, then Commissioner of Arakaan. He wrote, in 1856, that the location, beauty and resources of the Andamans and Nicobars should make them

a desirable and valuable part of the British Empire, rather than a "refuge ... in possession of a handful of degenerate negroes who are like beasts." The islands were, he continued, right on the route to important seats of trade like Calcutta, Madras, Akyab, Rangoon, Moulmein, Penang, Singapore. With their fine harbours and fertile soil, it was surprising to Captain Hopkinson that the government should want to blot them from the surface of the Earth, rather than to develop them.

The only remedy, according to Captain Hopkinson and many others was re-occupation. This time though, it should be done with a thorough plan in mind, and on a large scale. A large penal community would form the nucleus of the colony "which would grow side by side and would then merge." As they had already seen, a penal (convict) settlement is a good way to start a new colony, because it provides free labour for clearing the forest and construction, and all the other work involved. Penal settlements had already been established in Sumatra, Penang, Singapore and Burma. It is widely thought that the 1857 settlement was started to accommodate the prisoners from the First War of Independence or Sepoy Mutiny, but this was not the case. The central idea was actually to protect British ships and their crews and passengers from the 'savages' and, in the process, tame them.

The plan and scope of this second settlement was much wider than that of the first. This time, the idea was to occupy and settle people in the entire region using the penal settlement as a nucleus. The prisoners, when they became 'ticket of leave' citizens with some freedom to move around, could summon their families from the mainland and receive free land from the government. They would start a new life

in the islands. It was a practical and workable plan but narrow-minded people like John Barry and J.P. Walker cast a dark shadow over the project for the first few years. The government, sitting far away in Calcutta, was unable to control their cruelty, and they did a lot of damage.

So we come to another important Andamans date: 11 December 1857. The steam frigate ship *Semiramis* arrived in the Andamans, with the new survey team on board: Captain Mouat, Dr Playfair, and Lieutenant Heathcote. They had 20 European seamen from the Navy to deal with adivasi hostilities. They recommended in their report on January 1858, that the first settlement, the Old Harbour, be the site of the new colony. They re-named it Port Blair. The original buildings had, in the seventy-year gap since the settlement was moved to the north, crumbled and returned to forest, and the scattered stones and bricks rounded by the action of ocean waves.

On 15 January 1858, the government wrote to Captain H. Man, asking him to raise the Union Jack once more, in the name of Her Majesty the Queen and the East India Company. The Nicobars were similarly annexed, with another flag-raising in 1869. Captain Man was appointed Superintendent of Port Blair, and asked to develop the settlement quickly, so more prisoners could be shipped there. By now the Mutiny prisoners were swelling in number and the tougher protestors, who refused to give up fighting the British, were sentenced to life-transportation to Kala Pani as the Andamans were known. Captain Man had been the Superintendent of Convicts at Moulmein, Burma, and was an experienced manager of prison matters. He was to get things ready to receive 218 mutineers from the Punjab in six weeks! That meant construction, food

supplies, water, medical facilities (separate doctors for Europeans and Indians) and much more. He was directed to stay on the *Pluto* or a guard ship, handing over rations over the side (for his own safety, presumably) and leave once the settlement was functioning smoothly. Dr J.P. Walker would take over from him as Superintendent.

In March, the *Semiramis* steamed into Port Blair harbour again, this time with a different cargo. It carried two hundred prisoners, transported for life. They were the founding fathers of the Andaman islands. One of the present citizens of Junglighat, Port Blair, is the great-grandson of Mangal Singh Dogra, who was in this first batch of freedom fighters.

Captain Man's plan was to have several classes of prisoners, depending on their crimes, personality, and their repentance. Some, Class IV, might have to be restrained at times, and could be put in leg irons if needed. The Class II prisoners would become the *sirdars* and *tindals*, and be used to control and supervise the others. Thus, 'good behaviour' would be rewarded and rebellion punished. After they had served their sentences, their families could follow from the mainland and thus start populating and developing the settlement. In 1872 the Superintendent, Sir Donald Martin Stewart, became Chief Commissioner (CC) and he was the first of 24 chief commissioners until the coming of the Japanese and the collapse of the British government in the islands. They are still administered by a 'CC'.

The chosen locations were on the southern coast of South Andaman, such as Aberdeen and Chatham. Later, Viper island became a notorious part of the convict 'accommodation'. A massive operation to clear the forest was launched and then began the cutting down of trees. The Andamanese and Jarawa watched their forest homes being hacked down and destroyed. Their anger and frustration as they saw this were the seeds of their 'hostility', which was misunderstood and mercilessly put down.

The scarcity of water on the coast, however, made Walker request that his headquarters be shifted to Ross, a small island at the entrance of the harbour. The government agreed. Ross was an ideal choice. In case a convict managed to escape, he or she would face a mile-long swim to the South Andaman coast and then a long trek through dense tangles of trackless jungle, populated by leeches, ticks and hostile tribes. But this

didn't stop their attempts, partly because the whispered story in the convict lines was that if you kept walking north, you could get to Burma and join the King's service there. This was the dream or vision, that must have kept many prisoners sane and hopeful. Dr Walker became a local legend for all the wrong reasons. He was as cruel as a fairytale villain, and escape attempts were usually punished with hanging. 86 prisoners were hanged on just one day, bringing a protest from the government in Calcutta. His other favourite punishments were handcuffs, fetters and neck rings, as well as chaining convicts to each other.

But in spite of these horrific consequences of trying to escape, attempts continued. The most famous escape story is that of Dudhnath Tiwari, who was part of a group escape. Most of the others died of starvation or were killed by the Andamanese. Tiwari managed to survive for weeks in the jungle, starving and injured, until he was found and adopted by a group of Andamanese. He lived with them for about two years, married one of the women and had a child. But he decided to escape again, this time from his protectors, when he heard the Andamanese planning an attack on the convict settlement. They were going to attack the British barracks and convict lines in Aberdeen, which, though a prison, had been his home. His friends, acquaintances and keepers—many of them probably friendly and pleasant—were under grave threat because the Andamanese were planning a major confrontation and there would be many deaths on both sides.

Stealing away in the middle of the night, Dudhnath Tiwari went to the barracks and informed the British officers of the plan. Walker acted quickly, ordering the guards to be ready.

The guard ship was anchored between Ross and Aberdeen. When the Andamanese attacked they were so well prepared that there was a huge massacre of the Andamanese. Dudhnath was rewarded with freedom; his life sentence was cancelled and he became a free man.

As I have said before, the Andamanese *septs* as well as the Jarawa, were non-violent, even friendly, when the settlements first began. Several officials and observers have written about how the mood and behaviour of the tribes changed because of the constant harassment and bullying from the outsiders. One of these writers was M.V. Portman, one of the most civilised of the British administrators in the islands. He was the Officer-in-Charge of British Relations with the Aborigines, from 1879 to 1900. In his writings, he is often critical of the disgraceful behaviour of the guards and officers of the settlement, and sympathetic to the plight of the tribes who had been pushed out of their own territories. Almost overnight, their lives had been changed from a peaceful forest existence to one of terror and humiliation. Convict guards, armed with muskets, fired volleys to frighten them away. Many were killed to 'set an example' to the others. Andamanese and Jarawa were harassed and even murdered for sport, as casually as hunting animals or birds.

On mainland India, the resistance to British rule spread and intensified. The number of political prisoners shot up. The number of prisoners in the Andamans increased from 300 or 400 in 1858, to 12,000 in 1892 (of these, 803 were women). It was time to make more accommodation for these 'guests of the government', as people in jail are sometimes called in jest. The Cellular Jail was constructed between 1896 and 1906.

Andaman and Nicobar children know all about this depressing historical site, because today, it is one of the big tourist spots. The cruelty that went on within those walls is unbearable to think about. The courage of the convicts was unbelievable. John Barry, the warden, is as much of a historical villain, and even more so, than Mr Walker of Ross. Thousands of freedom fighters gave their health, their sanity and their lives, to help achieve the goal of a free India. They included people from all levels of Indian society, from rajas to coolies.

So many books are available about the Cellular Jail and its freedom fighter inmates that I won't go into much detail here. Thousands died; thousands suffered terrible hardships and insults. I walked around the Jail one sunny morning, and it was hard to imagine that this was where so many tragedies were played out. It is interesting to peer into the cells and catch the spirit of men like Veer Savarkar, whose career as a freedom fighter began when he was 14. At 22, he organised one of the first bonfires of foreign clothes, when the partition of Bengal was announced in 1905. When he was serving two life sentences and someone said he might, with luck, be freed in fifty years, he answered calmly. "But is British rule going to last fifty years?" Another famous name in the Andamans is of course Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, founder of the Azad Hind Fauj (Indian National Army) who believed that "the grossest crime is to compromise with injustice and wrong".

After the 1857 War of Independence, came the men and women from freedom fighter groups such as the Wahabis, the Moplahs, and the fiery revolutionaries of Bengal, Maharashtra and the many other states which were active in the freedom struggle. Their courage and spirit were not weakend by the

gross cruelties of the Cellular jail. Far from it; they protested about the conditions in the jail. Their hunger strikes and other non-violent protests captured the sympathy and imagination of everyone, including their British 'masters', and many were sent back to the mainland.

Meanwhile, just one watery mile away, Ross island was being called the 'Paris of the East'. Today, Ross is like a big old haunted house in a bad dream. Stone ruins peep out of the gnarled, twisted roots of old trees, birds and bees nest in the arches of once-upon-a-time doors and windows, gravestones tell about sad, unnatural deaths from arrow wounds and disease.

But a hundred years ago, it was a fantastic little settlement, with all the luxury and beauty that money could buy. Elaborate buildings were constructed, because the convicts were an unlimited and free labour force. Carpenters and other workmen were brought in from Burma to do special wood carving and lattice work on roof awnings, window arches and doorways.

In spite of its remote location and the constant danger of disease and adivasi hostility, life on Ross must have been a royal treat. There were two churches, a club, a hospital and a concert hall. The lighthouse and a tower on the barracks kept a round-the-clock vigil for ships. The location of the tower made it possible to scan the seas for twenty miles. A flag was hoisted when a ship was sighted, to signal all departments to make arrangements to receive it. Telephones were yet to come, and communication was in the form of semagrams, a type of message transmitted by Morse code. There were 30 signallers to operate the 24-hour communication service.

Off-duty, the officials, officers and their families had plenty of entertainment to choose from. There was a salty swimming pool, a fenced-off safe bay in the ocean with a wall to break the force of the waves. There were squash and tennis courts, an aviary and a turtle tank where tame turtles could be fed. The barracks were modelled after England's grand Windsor Castle. The Chief Commissioner's house, where there were regular parties and balls, had beautiful wooden dance floors, a stage for theatre performances and an orchestra 'pit' where a small group of musicians could play for guests dressed in sparkling silk and jewels. The architects and builders had the choice of the best wood in the world, and Italian tiles and other luxuries were imported, making Ross a unique place indeed, a self-sufficient island-city with the most spectacular views in the world.

And it was a proper city, not just a rough jungle settlement. It was a comfortable town with officers' quarters, guest houses, a post and telegram office, treasury, stores, godowns, flour mill, printing press, bakery, water reservoir, mineral water and ice factory, bazaar and a hospital with separate sections for Europeans, Indians and convicts. There was electricity! The power house had boilers imported from England. There was a little school for European children and, interestingly, one of the teachers was Miss Barry, sister of the cruel Cellular Jail warden John Barry. She was very different from him however, and her students remembered her as a loving and wonderful teacher.

Ross must have looked like a magic fairyland. The forest, the stars, the fantastic stained glass windows all helped to create a unique atmosphere. The forest sounds merging with

beautiful orchestral music, the fresh sea smells mingling with the fragrance of fresh bread and cakes in the bakery must have made it seem like paradise to those who lived there. There would have been excitement, as the 'ship sighted' flag was hoisted and people ran down to the jetty to get their mail from England or from mainland India, or to receive husbands, wives, children and parents.

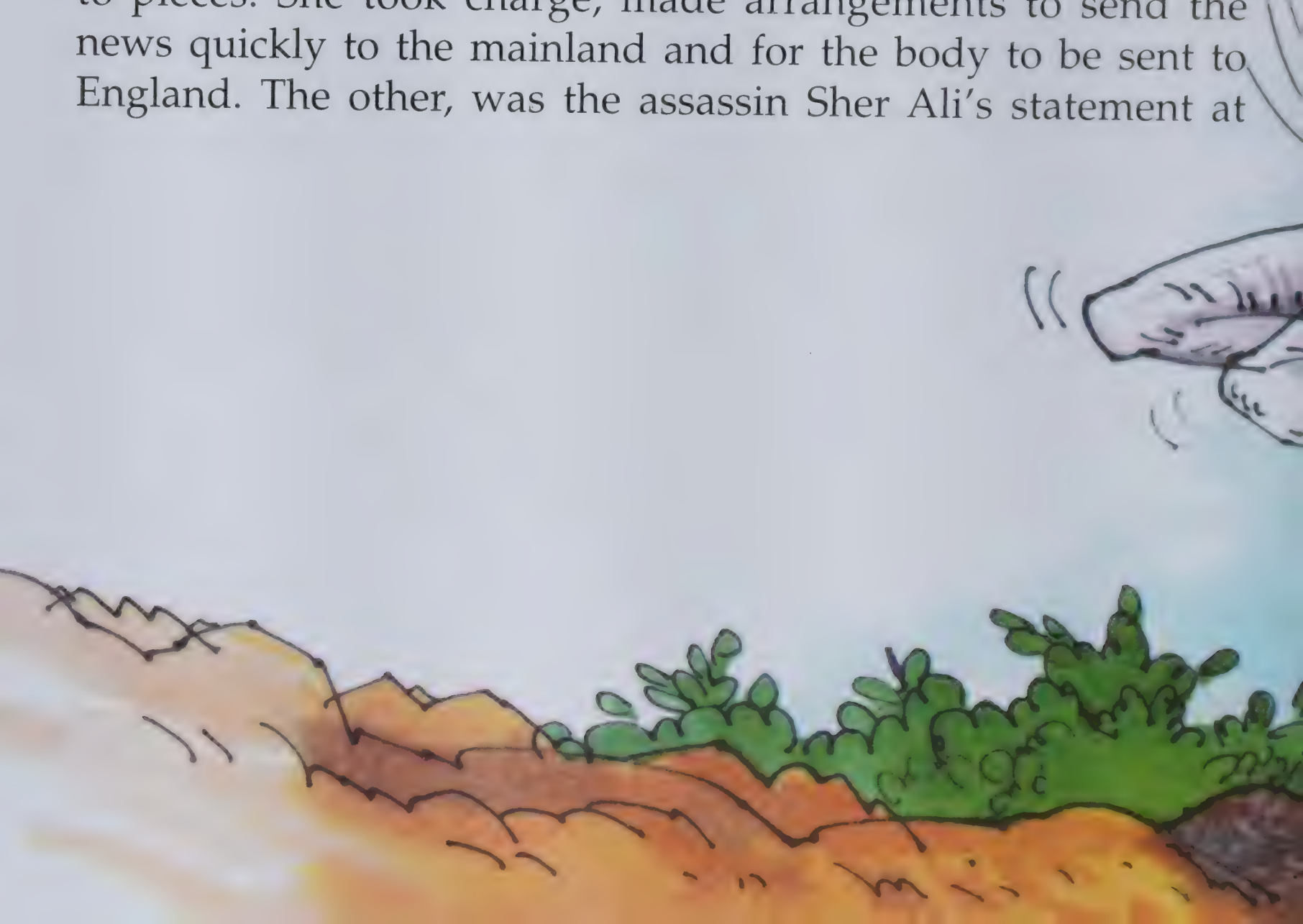
Certainly, one of the most memorable events would have been Lord and Lady Mayo's arrival in February 1872 on the *Glasgow*, which was anchored off Ross along with their escort ships *Dacca* and *Nemis*. Lord Mayo had come to inspect convict conditions, and look into possibilities of improving them.

Lord Mayo toured Ross island, heavily guarded by police and army personnel and accompanied by an impressive team of VIPs including the Chief Commissioner of British Burma. That afternoon he visited Viper island, even more enthusiastically guarded because the really hardened criminals were housed there. It is said that Lord Mayo protested the heavy guard, asking for more freedom to move around on his own and talk to people. He was trying to get a sense of the problems and needs of the settlement, and wanted to have some open talks with the convicts and others. The day was to end after he visited Chatham saw mill, but then he decided to walk up Mount Harriet from where one got a wide and spectacular view of the forest and sunset.

A police escort was arranged quickly. No danger was expected as there were no convicts in the area except stray 'ticket of leave' (half-free) ones. Riding a pony, the Viceroy got to the summit, spent some time admiring the view, and started back down.

On the way down, darkness descended. The Viceroy's party met a few men on the path; one group was carrying up chairs for Lady Mayo and her party to use the next morning. As they advanced up towards the peer in the light of flaming resin torches, a man sprang at Lord Mayo out of the darkness, and there was a scuffle. In the chaos, torches were thrown down and extinguished; there were confused yells and screams. Lord Mayo had been attacked with a sharp kitchen knife and received two fatal blows. He had either jumped or fallen into the shallow water. He said something to the effect of "I've been hit". The assassin was pursued and caught. By the time the wounded Viceroy was carried to the launch, he was unconscious and died soon after.

Two things stand out about the murder of Lord Mayo. One was Lady Mayo's strength and courage. She was far from home and the tragedy was sudden and terrible. But she did not go to pieces. She took charge, made arrangements to send the news quickly to the mainland and for the body to be sent to England. The other, was the assassin Sher Ali's statement at



the trial: that if European officers saw him strike he was guilty, but if only natives saw it, then he was not. What point was he trying to make here?

The glory of Ross ended abruptly after two momentous events. The first was the terrible earthquake of 26 June 1941, which brought disaster to the Andamans and Nicobars. The Central Tower of the Cellular Jail collapsed, killing a warden and injuring others. On Ross, buildings came tumbling down and prisoners had to be shifted to Viper island until repairs could be carried out. Then in 1942, the Japanese army swept across south-east Asia, occupied Shonan (Singapore), captured Rangoon in January 1942, and advanced towards the Bay of Bengal. This was big news for the British government in India, because it meant that they would reach the Andamans very quickly. Defence would be impossible, since there were only a handful of prison guards and soldiers.

The British government beat a hasty retreat, leaving the settlers and convicts to their fate. There was a small Gorkha regiment, which was sent off to Calcutta to avoid a battle. On 23 March 1942, the Japanese army landed at Corbyn's Cove and other coastal points, occupying the islands without firing a single shot. It was the easiest 'conquest' of the war. Life became hell in the islands for the next three-and-a-half years. There are people who survived and remember this dark period, and their stories prove that during times of war, human beings are capable of both extreme cruelty as well as extreme courage.

TOPSY TURVY

I want to go back in time a little and talk about Topsy, the Andamanese woman who became an important part of the penal settlement's team, which contacted and 'tamed' new groups of the Andamanese and Jarawa. So return with me to the British government's convict colony before the Japanese occupation.

To me, Topsy is a symbol of what went wrong for the indigenous people of the Andamans and Nicobars. She was kidnapped, 'tamed', fed, clothed, ridiculed, used and exploited. The British officers thought they were being nice to her by rescuing her from the forest and accommodating her in a modern house (which was a leaky, drafty hut). She should have been grateful, and happy, they thought. Well, Topsy drowned in the channel between Ross and Aberdeen islands when, miserable and homesick, she tried to escape from the British.

Topsy was the wife of Jumbo. Names like these were commonly given to the Andamanese, as the British tongue was unable to pronounce their real ones. They were ridiculed through these pet names: Queen Victoria, Snowball, Juno. Well, Jumbo was arrested and sentenced to seven months in prison for murdering a naval guard called Pratt. Jumbo was an important man among the Andamanese and his capture caused

alarm and sorrow throughout his tribe. It was later discovered that the murdered man, Pratt, had assaulted Jumbo's wife Topsy, and been attacked in revenge. He was released, but not before he had suffered terribly at the hands of the convict guards and officers.

To the British and mainland Indians, the indigenous people of the Andamans and Nicobars were curiosities and interesting human specimens. Their foreheads, arms, legs and other body parts were measured, samples of their hair preserved. Many were taken to Calcutta, Madras (Chennai), and even as far as New Zealand, as exhibits of a primitive race. Can you imagine how it must have felt, being transported from the pristine jungles of the Andamans or Nicobars, to the noise and bustle of a big city?

One such instance was when thirteen Andamanese were taken to Penang, Malaysia, in 1885 and were greeted with stares and shouts of 'Handumans!' in the streets. People spat on them, roared with laughter, and threw things. These 'specimens' didn't last long. Their minds and bodies collapsed from the strain. Others died of colds and other common diseases, to which their body systems had no resistance. When important government officials and VIPs such as viceroys visited the islands, some of the friendly Andamanese were put on display. They were discussed and inspected, and made to dance and sing. Meanwhile, irresponsible people from the settlement, both British and Indians, harassed them and often plundered their camps as a 'prank', taking away bows, arrows and other precious items. No wonder they started plundering the settlement; but when they did it, it became a crime and was no longer considered just a harmless prank.

This cruelty to indigenous people continues; not just in the Andamans and Nicobars but in the entire country and, actually in the whole world. 'Adivasis', as they are called, are often asked to put up a 'show' for important guests. Many visitors to the islands want to visit the adivasi areas; this is understandable, since it is certainly an exciting sight to see people who are not in touch with the outside world? But is it fair to do terrible damage to these isolated human races, with the best intentions in the world? For example, I might want to hug and kiss a Jarawa child or give her gifts, to show my interest and affection. But even a brief physical contact could lead to that child's death, from germs I may pass on. You and I have immune systems that can deal with and wipe out our common illnesses like the flu. A few sneezes and coughs, a bit of fever perhaps, a day or two off from school … after which we're fine again, and ready to take on the next germ that comes along!

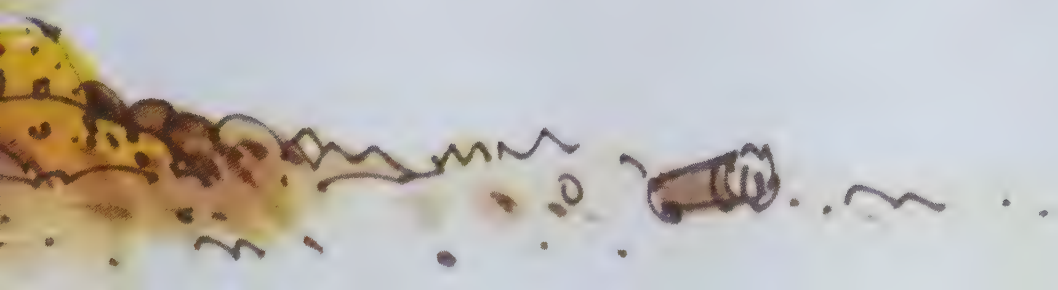
But it's very different for the Jarawa or Onge or Sentinelese. To them, our common 'harmless' germs are the equivalent of an AIDS virus. It's a killer. If I hug that Jarawa child, she may be dead in a matter of days. In the seventy years from 1900 to 1970, the Andamanese population fell from three or four thousand to a mere forty individuals. How did this tragedy happen? It happened not from evil intentions, but from lack of awareness, or ignorance and a feeling of superiority. A feeling that we carry with us even today: that indigenous people must be 'civilised', and have the wonderful opportunities and lives that we modern people have! Some people, however, feel very strongly that indigenous people should be left alone, to enjoy their own rich culture and lifestyles. What about you, what do you think?

The fall of the Andamanese tribe has many important lessons, which we must pay attention to. During the ninety years between 1858 and 1941, from the start of the Port Blair settlement to the Japanese occupation, many mistakes were made which were to have a fatal effect on the Andamanese tribe. The deaths of the handful of surviving Andamanese, on Strait island, will see the end of the tribe. This means that in a mere hundred and fifty years, 'modern man' has wiped out a community and culture that was healthy, energetic and confident. The biggest killer of all was the shelter built for them in 1870, ironically called the Andaman Home. They died like flies in this 'home'. Why was it started?

There was always a feeling in the British settlements, that hunter-gatherers were starving and hungry, because they spent so much time looking for food. This was one of the reasons for the Andaman Home; the other reason was our firm belief that modern man is the best, and that we have been put here on Earth to help hunter-gatherers and other indigenous peoples. It was a shelter for them to come and stay in for as long as they liked. That was the original idea, anyway, but later there were times when the Andamanese were chained and guarded, so they could not leave. Unfortunately, there were periods of history when there was no distinction between the Andamanese and the convicts. They were given food and tobacco, clothes and education. Now let us quickly look at each of these in turn. Eating alien food such as rice and dal, instead of their healthy, fibrous wild food, wrecked their digestive systems. Would your stomach enjoy a total change of diet? What if you had to, suddenly, change over to a diet of seaweed and mice, would your stomach like it?

There is no need to discuss the issue of giving them tobacco. We all know how harmful it is. The handing out of clothes to the 'naked savages' was a high priority. The British, and later the Indians as well, felt that clothes are an essential part of being proper human beings. Today, many Jarawa wear clothes. In those days, too, the Andamanese began to cover themselves with the old clothes and rags handed out to them. Perhaps it was done to protect British ladies from the sight of naked bodies. We Indians, however, are no better and we continue to think everyone must wear clothes. But, interestingly, the wearing of clothes also caused severe pulmonary and respiratory diseases like pneumonia and tuberculosis. Maybe it was because they stopped covering themselves with clay, their traditional and effective protection against chilly winds and breezes.

As for education ... well, the Andamanese were taught crafts like cane-work, and British skills such as how to eat with knives and forks, and how to dress 'properly'. There were attempts to teach them English. The children were of course, totally uninterested in all these subjects that were not a part of their own lives. They kept trying to run away or pretending to be sick, or asleep. Why didn't we try to learn their language, instead of teaching them ours? After a hundred and fifty years of contact with the Andaman and Nicobar tribes, not one British or mainland Indian person can speak their languages; we have some lists of Jarawa, Onge and Andamanese words, but that is all. Because of this arrogance on our part, twelve Andamanese languages have been lost, since each *sept* had its own vocabulary and grammar. What a great loss to the world! They had so much to tell us, if only we had listened rather



than talked. For example, both the Andamanese and the Onge had names in their tribes for large land animals, which they had never seen. This led people to wonder whether the Andamans had, at one point, been part of a bigger land mass including Burma or Malaysia or both.

Because no one had really studied the language and culture of the Andamanese in any depth, there were many misunderstandings. Just one small example is the report of an official that Andamenese often seemed to be unhappy and wept loudly. Well, the fact is that they weep when greeting one another, so it's a joyous weeping and not a sad one.

There was another problem with the Andaman Home. The people in charge of the inhabitants were convicts, who treated the Andamanese ruthlessly. In the minds of the Andamanese, the Home was like a prison where there was no freedom. They ran away whenever they could, and this spread the germs from the settlement to the entire tribe. Hundreds died every year, from measles and other infections. Once, there were so many deaths at the Home that burial became difficult.

History teaches us so many lessons. But it can only teach us, if we are ready to learn. Let us stop for a minute and think. What is the lesson we must learn from the history of the Andamanese? What did we do wrong? By 'we' I mean both the British and post-independence Indian governments, and people including anthropologists and other officials. I also include all citizens of independent India, because we have a very special responsibility towards our indigenous cultures. People who belong to such groups are our fellow citizens who can survive only if the rest of us are sensitive and caring about their needs.

So, what were our mistakes? Let me tell you what I think, and you can decide whether you agree or disagree with me. Of course the first and biggest mistake was to belittle the Andaman culture and lifestyle. 'Belittle' means to think something is not important or valuable. It also means looking down on something or someone. Well, we always felt the desire to improve their lives because they were not living the way they should. We wanted them to live like us. It might have been better to learn from them instead, and adopt their ways. If we had done this, we might have been calm, peaceful, nature-loving, happy people rather than the greedy and violent fighters we seem to have become.

The second mistake was to take them out of their forest homes and bring them into contact with our diseases. Indigenous people all over the world have died and continue to die, from our germs and infections. We have talked about their lack of immunity to our diseases. These can spread as rapidly as fire, and with terrible results. The 1867 outbreak of measles started in the Home and, as the infected and sick Andamanese 'ran away' into the forest, entire *septs* were affected and hundreds died. It was different with the Nicobarese, maybe because they had been exposed to outside people for many centuries, and their body systems were stronger.

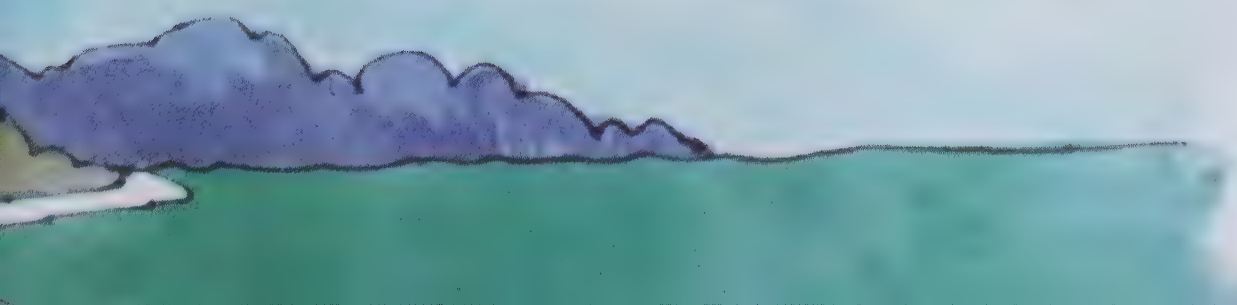
The third was more than a mistake. It was a purposeful and violent act, like shooting people or pushing them over a cliff. Alcohol and tobacco, the poisons of the modern world, were gifted to them, sometimes as rewards for catching runaway convicts or attacking Jarawa settlements.

And what were the Jarawa doing during this time? They

were watching, carefully. They saw what was going on with the Andamanese. They must have noticed, with fear and amazement, that contact and friendship with the white and brown outsiders had brought the Andamanese nothing but problems.

The Jarawa wisely decided to stay away. But when their land was threatened by trespassers or poachers, they fought back. The British government created a 'divide and rule' policy with the indigenous people, encouraging the Andamanese to attack the Jarawa and keep them away from the settlement. Some of the old reports suggest that the Andamanese were actually rewarded for provoking the Jarawa. The Jarawa, desperate to protect their forest homeland and people, would react by attacking the settlement. Later, they also raided settlements to steal iron to make their arrow tips and tools.

After such an attack or raid, there would be a 'punitive mission' against the Jarawa. These were very unequal battles, with British army guns and other modern weaponry on one side, and bows and arrows on the other. It is really too gruesome to go into the details of these encounters, but one small fact gives us the general picture. In 1925, one four-month long mission led by 30 military police killed 37 Jarawa, shooting them down like animals. That might have been about one-sixth of the entire population of the Jarawa, one of the purest and oldest human races in the world.



AFTER INDEPENDENCE

On 15 August 1947, a different (and more colourful) flag was hoisted in many parts of the Andamans and Nicobars. Watching the ceremonies and celebrating the beginning of a new and free India, was the entire settler population of the Andamans and Nicobars. Many of these were ex-convicts and their families, starting a new life on the free land given to them by the government. Being families of freedom fighters from all over the country, it was a true Indian crowd; there were people from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. This has remained one of the strengths of the Andaman-Nicobar population, that different kinds of cultures and religions live together peacefully. The Karen community was there too; the Karens had been 'imported' from Burma in the early 1900s to work in the growing Andaman timber industry.

In those early days, the Andaman population also included a few British and Anglo-Indian people who had stayed on. One of them was Fred Burn, who came soon after independence. He was the head of the Bush Police, a British police unit set up to control the 'hostile' adivasis. Later he became the manager of the Wimco Match Factory in Port Blair. 'Burn Sahib' became a well-known figure in the islands. His generosity and ready smile greeted almost every visitor in

those early days, when few people travelled to this remote part of the country. Another was Captain Dennis Beale, a short stocky Burmese seaman who set up an inter-island shipping business. It never did well, because he was so generous and seldom sent bills or collected money from his clients. The total population of the islands, including the indigenous tribes at that time, was about 30,000. There was plenty of land, food and water for everyone.

But this situation did not last too long. With generous incentives being offered to settlers, more and more people arrived from mainland India. Each family was given timber for house construction, a large piece of farm land to grow rice, coconuts and fruit, and a one-acre house plot. Additional timber was given every few years for house repair and expansion. The idea was to boost the sparse population. As we can see, the project was a little too successful! There has been a serious population explosion in the islands, with disastrous results on the environment. Today the population is over 5 lakhs, and resources are beginning to groan and crumble under this massive human weight. Over 15% of the precious forest has been cut down, and we know now how drastically this affects the water storage and perhaps even the rainfall. There is a severe water shortage on all the forty or so inhabited islands, but development continues at a fast gallop. It is time to stop the migration from the mainland, and preserve whatever resources are left.

Nine years after Independence, in 1956, the Indian government passed a special act, called the Andaman and Nicobar Protection of Aboriginal Tribes Regulation (ANPATR). This Act mapped and protected pieces of traditional adivasi

lands as Reserves, which outside people could not enter or use in any way. Over 700 square kilometres along the western coast of South and Middle Andaman became the Jarawa Reserve. The islands of North Sentinel (50 square kilometres) and Little Andaman (520 square kilometres) are also reserves, for the Sentinelese and the Onge. The Andamanese were given land on Strait island, and the Shompen on Great Nicobar. The entire Nicobar archipelago is a reserve for the Nicobarese. It was a wonderful decision, showing that independent India respected all the different cultures of its citizens, would take care of their needs, and not exploit or mistreat those who were illiterate, and therefore helpless. The ANPATR also recognised that forest-dwelling hunter-gatherer groups like the Jarawa, Onge and Shompen need a certain amount of undisturbed forest habitat to survive.

Today, the picture is very gloomy indeed. The size of every tribe except the Nicobarese has continued to decrease. The Onge population has halved since independence; there are less than 100 Onges today, with a zero birth-rate. The Shompens are also on their way out, with a similar estimate of their numbers, and the Jarawa may total 200 or less. As you probably know, the last 30 Andamanese are living out

their sad and sick lives on Strait island. For all practical purposes, the Andamanese are extinct.

No one knows how many Sentinelese survive. We have no idea who visits the island and what goes on there, because it is difficult to approach. Some anthropologists fear that many Sentinelese have been killed by international fishermen who landed there a few years ago. We have no way of being sure. We can only hope that the Sentinelese are alive and well. But they may not be.

There is a sad and funny story about the Fisheries Department teaching the Onge how to fish, using a modern fishing reel and rod. How ridiculous! The 'teachers' soon discovered that their 'students' knew much more than they did, and gave up the silly attempt. Instead of being proud to have such ancient races sharing the archipelago with them, some settlers feel it's something to be ashamed of. You young people must teach the adults around you that indigenous people are wise and wonderful co-citizens. Their knowledge of the forest and its resources is being used around the world, and many of our drugs come from plant enzymes and chemicals that they discovered. Their information systems are often exploited by drug and pharmaceutical companies. A cure for cerebral malaria used by the Onge was the subject of one such 'kidnapping' of information. Intellectual property rights or the protection of this kind of information, is becoming a major issue all over the world.

It is just as important to leave the indigenous people untouched. Physical displacement of tribes is a universal problem, as populations rise and we become more and more land-hungry. When we take away adivasi lands for roads,

plantations and other purposes, it spells doom to the original users. It is easy to sit at a desk, look at a map, and say: 'Well, they have so much land; surely we can take this chunk...' But the fact is that hunter-gatherers need a certain ratio of forest land per person.

Tribes occupy certain lands rather than others, because of specific and important reasons. For example, when the Andamanese were pushed out of South Andaman by the penal settlement, they lost access to certain types of clay needed to make pots. Similarly, the Jarawa were forced into the western half of South and Middle Andaman, away from important fresh water catchment areas.

Until the early 1800s, the tribes were the sole inhabitants and owners of the Andamans and Nicobars. Then, their prime lands were taken over by the penal settlement and later by the needs of independent India. This would have been acceptable, if we had stuck to and respected the boundary lines. However, this did not happen and each of the reserves given to the indigenous people has shrunk quite a bit. The 340-kilometre Andaman Trunk Road, connecting Port Blair to Diglipur, was started in 1971 and runs right through the Jarawa Reserve, forming its eastern boundary. Think about how it has affected the Jarawa: trucks and lorries, mass felling of trees, frightening crowds of people, policemen with guns and lathis keeping them out of parts of their own territory.

The Jarawa history of interaction with the settlers has never been easy. Although it is illegal to enter their reserve areas, poachers have always sneaked in to hunt pig, pigeons, fish, turtles and other animals. Several Jarawa have been injured and killed. The number of Jarawa killed is at least several

hundred. But they were somewhat safe as long as they were 'hostile'. They had decided not to interact with the outsiders.

Then, in the early 1970s, the practice of 'gift dropping' began. Government parties went out in boats to Jarawa camping areas, taking with them plastic buckets, cloth (usually red), matches, and other things we felt would make their life easier. At first the Jarawa would have nothing to do with all this. Then, one group gave in and began accepting these gifts and socialising with the people. Soon, others joined in. They would come on to the boats, take whatever they felt like, and dance and sing and be photographed. Some people in the

Andamans felt this was a good thing, and the contact groups would finally 'tame' the Jarawa. Others felt this was the beginning of the end. They may well have been right. Why do you think they felt that?

Then, in 1997, Enmey hit the headlines and became a celebrity. Enmey is a Jarawa boy who changed Jarawa history. He was hunting in the forest near Kadamtalla, and seems to have fallen from a tree and fractured his foot. Local settlers, who found him limping and in pain, took him to a hospital in Port Blair and he was treated and looked after well. On recovering, he was taken back to where he was found, and vanished into his forest home.

Imagine the excitement as he entered his family hut or group camp! What stories he had to tell, about electricity and television and cameras and exotic food and cars! By this time, most of the Jarawa knew something about the 'other people' so Enmey's stories wouldn't have been as scary as they might have been say, twenty years before. They must have been exciting.

Soon, small groups of Jarawa began coming out of the forest, and walking into settlements without any sign of fear. They were given food and clothes, radios and bags ... and diseases! An outbreak of influenza and measles followed, and may have wiped out half of the population. Photographs started appearing in the newspapers, of Jarawa jumping on to buses and cars on the trunk road, asking for hand-outs. They have become beggars and performers, dancing for cameras and to entertain sight-seeing groups who want to be photographed with Jarawa. What a sad end to a vibrant and independent community!

But does it have to be the end? Anthropologists say the Jarawa can be encouraged to go back to their traditional lives if we stop giving them food. Where there's a will, there's a way and it can be done. The Jarawa must be saved at all costs.

Besides all the reasons we have discussed so far, here's another: geneticists have recently found that the Andaman tribes, mainly the Jarawa and Onge, are one of the oldest genetic pools of the human race. Their ancient DNA holds secrets and solutions to all sorts of important gaps in our knowledge of subjects like the human immune system and its development. The studies also show that the Andaman tribes are not descended from African slaves, as was sometimes supposed. Nor did they make the overland journey from Africa. They are off- shoots of mainland Indian tribes and are thus properly and absolutely Indian.

Increasing population, decreasing resources. This is a world-wide problem. The administration in the Andamans and Nicobars has to constantly balance these two opposing issues, and it's not easy. I'm glad I'm not the Chief Commissioner or the Chief Conservator of Forests or any of those poor people who have to take decisions. But there are three golden rules that experts keep stressing: limited development, conservation of the remaining forest, and an enlightened adivasi policy. We are already seeing the results of uncontrolled development. Energy shortage, pollution, filth and disease are now a part of life in places like Port Blair, Rangat and Diglipur. A fraction of the original forest remains, and that too is under heavy pressure from 'squatters' and illegal timber contractors. The third issue, the adivasi policy, is one which has been in the news a lot, because of the construction of the Andaman Trunk Road (ATR) and other developments. These led to a recent case in the Supreme Court where major Andaman-Nicobar policies were discussed and changed.

Briefly, what happened was this: three organisations, concerned about the fate of Little Andaman and the Onges, filed a case in the High Court in Calcutta protesting against the massive logging and land encroachment in progress. In 1999, the case was moved to the Supreme Court in Delhi, and the hearing took place in late 2001. The judgement was that forest felling must stop, not only on Little Andaman but in the entire union territory. The court appointed a committee

to study the needs of the islands, including the situation of the tribes, and to make recommendations. This was done. The expert committee said that certain measures had to be urgently taken to protect the sensitive and important island ecosystem. These included a ban on tree-cutting, except for local construction, a ban on timber export and sale out of the islands, removing encroachments, stopping sand mining, and closing down the Andaman Trunk Road. They also strongly opposed monoculture, such as the oil palm plantations on Little Andaman. Ecologists all over the world agree that monoculture is bad for the environment in many ways.

The good news is that the committee's suggestions have been accepted by the Supreme Court, and also have the support of many of the Andamans and Nicobars people. A

huge change is underway and it is not proving easy. Sawmills have been closed down and thousands of people in the timber industry have lost their jobs. Sand mining must be phased out, which means alternative construction materials have to be found. There is simply no alternative if we want the Andamans and Nicobars to remain habitable.

The effects of logging and sand mining are there for all to see. Erosion has denuded the land, washing away the topsoil (which is always thinner in rainforest areas) and destroying large areas of coral reefs. With little root-retention, rain water runs into the ocean. Important sea turtle nesting beaches have vanished. With the beach-barrier gone, sea water flows further and further inland, destroying paddy and other crops. Houses and roads have also been inundated and washed away. Having destroyed the beach, we then make walls to contain the sea ... which also get eroded. The list of disasters is endless. Tampering with Nature is a dangerous business indeed.

The problem is that we always see development as something that means a lot of construction, power-based industries, roadways and private transport. We feel that development and ecological health cannot go hand-in-hand; one has to exclude the other. But the truth is that there cannot be human habitation and development unless there is ecological health as well. And it is possible to achieve this, but our definition of development has to change. We must think small, sustainable, and environmentally friendly. That means no plastic bags, no huge concrete structures, no enormous industries, and a limited number of vehicles on the road. Is this possible? Yes, it is. It's being done very successfully in many countries.

ENDEMICS AND EXOTICS

The Nicobar megapode is a fascinating bird. The size of a chicken, it industriously builds a mound nest of fallen leaves and humus. This means that the mother doesn't have to bother sitting on the eggs, since they are kept warm by the rotting vegetation. But she doesn't heartlessly go away, either. She checks the temperature regularly, with an unusual thermometer: her beak! The most amazing thing about megapodes though, is that the chicks are born 'ready made', wings and all, and can fly as soon as they hatch. They don't have to undergo those long hours of flying practice that other baby birds need.

Megapodes are one of about a hundred species of endemic birds in the Andamans and Nicobars. You will remember that 'endemic' means found only in that one place, and nowhere else in the world. About 40 mammals, 10 amphibians, 30 reptiles and hundreds of insect and plant species (including corals) make up the list of Andaman and Nicobar endemics. Among these is the shy, bright-green Andaman day gecko which, unlike normal geckos, is a day-time creature. There are fascinating bats and pipistrelles about which little is known. About one-tenth of the Andaman-Nicobar plants and animals are endemic. Endemism is high here because these islands

were separated from mainland Asia tens of thousands of years ago, and many species have evolved to survive in this unique habitat.

As we have seen earlier, there are several rich ecosystems in the approximately 400 islands of the archipelago: the forest, the mangrove belt, the beach, and the coral reefs. Within these are other smaller ecosystems: the tree canopy, the forest floor, volcanoes and lakes, rivers, mountains and a number of other land-forms. The forest type is mainly tropical evergreen or rainforest. Most rainforests grow in the world's tropical regions, between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn. In India they occur in the Andamans and Nicobars, the Western Ghat mountains, and parts of the north-east. Worldwide, rainforests are the home of some of the world's most fascinating and special animals, such as the mountain gorilla, the jaguar, and the unbelievably beautiful birds of paradise. The millions of years of evolution, the high humidity,

and thick evergreen vegetation make the biodiversity in rainforests the highest of any ecosystem.

The forest, as you know, plays a big part in human survival. Without forests, there would be no food, oxygen, water ... in other words, no life. Deforestation (cutting down forests) causes floods and drought; the bounty of the monsoon is simply washed away into the sea.

In spite of these well-known facts, we continue to hack down forests. Over 95% of the land area of the Andaman and Nicobars was covered with rainforest and mangrove trees at the time of occupation in the mid-1800s. Today, a lot of that is gone. The greenery which is often marked as 'forest' on maps and surveys is simply secondary growth, a sort of second-hand vegetation pretending to be real forest. It is not so easy to regain true rainforest; after all, it takes 30 million years to make one!

The Supreme Court has now put a stop to all logging in the Andamans and Nicobars, and the timber industries are to be phased out. If the Court's orders are carried out seriously, then the islands have a good chance of recovering their ecological health. After all, there are also over a hundred sanctuaries and national parks here, and these include forests, coral reefs, mangrove, and other ecosystems. But we must remember that these protected areas are, in a way, sacred, and must not be 'de-notified' to suit our short-term goals. Sanctuaries and parks are an investment in tomorrow, while deforestation only takes care of today. Safe and secure forests ensure us oxygen, food and water for the future. Often, greedy people deprive the rest of us of these basic necessities by cutting down and selling timber and other forest produce, which brings in a lot of money. It is important that they be severely punished, because it is a crime that affects all the people who live in an area. That's what deforestation means: that lakhs of people are being robbed of essentials by criminals who are on the same level as murderers and dacoits. And the lakhs of people are already poor, while the timber thieves get richer and richer. As they zoom about in bigger and bigger cars, the local people have to make do with less and less water and walk farther and farther to fetch it. Does that sound right?

We only have to look at Cherrapunji, once the wettest place in the country and now plagued by drought. With the forest gone, the rain water simply runs down the steep hillsides and into the ocean, instead of being soaked up into the water-table. The same is happening in the Andamans and Nicobars. No forest, no water: that's the sad truth, and the sooner we

learn it the better. But as far as the environment is concerned, we Indians aren't great learners! We have managed to make the tiger and lion almost extinct, and thousands of other animals as well. We have built enormous dams that have altered the landscape and, possibly, the Earth's crust. We have released dangerous, even fatal, chemicals into the air, soil and water resulting in vast numbers of deaths and diseases every year. The only comfort is that we are not the only country doing these things; many others seem to be just as short sighted as we are.

The extinction of species goes far beyond the sadness of losing one more animal or bird or plant. If the tiger becomes extinct, or the lion, or any other species, it will make a huge, irreparable gap in the natural chain and will affect our own lives because we are part of the chain, too. Extinction in the Andamans and Nicobars has already begun, and there are serious fears for many species including the Nicobar megapode, Narcondam hornbill and Andaman pig. These are all endemics and should they disappear from here, it means they have disappeared from the face of the Earth.

There is an urgent problem facing endemics, and indeed all wildlife and forests of the Andamans and Nicobars. There are strangers in their midst, unwelcome guests, and they need to go home. They are called exotics, and have turned the chain of Nature upside down and inside out. Exotics are plants and animals that do not belong to that habitat, or place. They have been put there by Man ... British Man as well as Indian Man. Man is of course, the most dangerous and clumsy creature on Earth. He likes to meddle, change and mess up everything around him. By bringing exotics into the Andamans and Nicobars, he made a really serious blunder because island ecosystems are the most sensitive and thus the easiest to endanger. Surprisingly, the humble pet dog has been the most destructive outsider.

Domestic dogs were first brought to the islands in the mid-1800s, as pets. By the late 1800s they were becoming a 'nuisance', roaming the narrow streets of Ross island, Aberdeen island and Chatham island, looking for food. Some were given to the Andamanese tribe and were used as hunting dogs, which really increased the adivasi's hunting ability. Since then, the Andamanese and later the Karens have always used dogs to track down and hunt deer, pig, monitor lizard and other game. Soon, packs of these dogs became 'feral', which means half-wild. Feral animals are an environmental disaster for many reasons. For one thing, they are exotics and we already know all about that.

Today, many of the rare species of these islands are further threatened because of these stray and feral dogs. Just one of many of their destructive activities is that they eat up sea turtle eggs and hatchling sea turtles. During the turtle nesting season, packs of these deadly terminators roam around the beaches, even biting off the flippers of the nesting female and thus leaving her crippled, and easy prey for other larger predators like sharks. It is now estimated by naturalists, that on some beaches not a single nest survives these canine raiding parties. On many others only half the nests and hatchlings survive. Similarly, monitor lizard eggs and their young, crocodile eggs, birds and other wildlife make up the prey of these dogs. They are lethal, and may cause extinction on a large scale unless something is done soon.

Because exotics do not have natural predators, they often multiply rapidly, and gobble up the entire habitat! This has happened with the spotted deer or cheetal, which were introduced in the Andamans in the 1930s and have become a

major pest. Cheetal eat the new shoots and saplings, fallen seeds and fruit of native trees, thus crippling forest regeneration and growth. With no predator to take care of their numbers, they have caused immense harm and even swum to and colonised distant islands. Fortunately they have not managed to get to the Nicobars. There is an even larger herbivore here and it has eaten up an entire island! A herd of about 35 elephants was abandoned on Interview island by a bankrupt timber company in the 1950s. Once 'tame' and accustomed to human presence, they became feral and therefore dangerous, attacking and killing people. A herd of elephants needs tons and tons of food every day, and the forest was stripped bare.

Naturalists observe that the food resources are depleting and the future of these giants is very uncertain. In the process, the large and valuable natural forest of Interview Island has been destroyed. Shouldn't the government sue, and punish, the timber company that committed this ecological crime? Shouldn't they be made to transport the elephants back to the mainland, so Interview has a chance to recover and regain its forest? No doubt it would be a huge operation. The animals would have to be tranquilised and carried on to ships for the journey back. Dart guns and specialised vets and cranes would be involved. Very costly. But the ecological cost of the present situation is far greater.

During the Japanese occupation of the Andamans and Nicobars, there was a severe food shortage because the British navy was blocking supply lines to the islands. The Japanese Command brought in and released the Giant African Snail, to be harvested for eating. This hungry guest has been a disaster for the vegetation, and its thriving population is causing great concern. To try and control its numbers, two predatory snails were introduced in the 1960s but this only caused further damage. The Andamans and Nicobars have 85 species of endemic snails, and some may already be extinct, wiped out by these introduced species. Other exotics that have permanently altered the natural balance and vegetation of the archipelago include crows, squirrels, goats, mynas, cats and many others. Releasing exotic species in a habitat is asking for trouble; big trouble. It can only be done in certain conditions after a careful study by experienced and expert ecologists. Indian ecologists managed to stop the introduction, around 1990, of barn owls on Little Andaman, to control the rat

population there. Other animals like panther and sambar were released but failed to survive.

Tampering with nature is a costly business, ultimately endangering our own survival. Mother nature has it all worked out, through millions of years of practice, so how could we possibly compete with her? The more we leave Nature alone, the better our own lives will be. The more we destroy and change, the worse our own fate. It is up to each of us to practice, spread, and enforce this small rule. Teach it to your friends, family and teachers. If you are successful, we still have a chance of saving the amazing Andamans and Nicobars.

A lot can still be done to protect and empower the tribes of the Andamans and Nicobars. However, this requires a major change in attitude. To start with, we must accept and appreciate their culture and lifestyle without trying to change or 'improve' them. Think about it: are our modern, urban lives so wonderful? Is it really worth gifting our kind of living to these happy, content people?

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